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choice

Travel special

Car rental rip-offs
Bag security
The facts on vax

Slimming pills

Fat loss or fat profits?

iPad2 review p24

APPLIANCES THAT GO FOREVER

Fresh horizons

Welcome to a new look – and, as always, CHOICE's probing reports and in-depth tests

Over the past few months our editor Mary Gillespie and the rest of our terrific CHOICE team have been working hard to bring a fresh look to our magazine. Everything you've told us you love is still there – all the news, in-depth reports and product tests you expect, plus there's our new Ask the Experts column, where our knowledgeable staffers answer your questions. However, you'll see we've made our layouts cleaner and easier to read, with colour and visuals to help you find the stories you want to read with ease.

So turn the page and dive straight into Checkout, with the latest news, along with all your old favourites, including campaign updates, member noticeboard and First Looks.

This month, we take a peek at the new iPad 2. Steve Duncombe from the *CHOICE Computer* team braved the crowds and queues the first day it went on sale to buy one. Does it live up to all the hype? He gives you the scoop on page 5.

Alongside all the news and info you'd expect (including, we report, a win from Aldi following our story about their less-than-uniform pricing policy last month!), Libbi Gorr writes for us about her tangles with Telstra and we meet Lyn and Warren, the members who joined us for the CHOICE Awards.

Time-poor readers want their information cleanly and attractively presented

Poring over the proofs: from left, editor Mary Gillespie, verifier Jane Bardell, CEO Nick Stace and senior designer Maria Szanto.

If you're planning a trip, turn to our travel special (page 16), where we look at the tricks and traps of car rental agreements, whether suitcase locks really work and all you need to know about travel vaccinations.

Our test team has also been hard at work, with more than 100 products featured this month. With the winter nip biting in the evenings, we weigh up your heating options. There's also our latest dishwasher test, plus we give the lowdown on vacuums and offer tips on which game console is best for you.

Most importantly, this magazine is for you, our members, and we'd like to hear what you think, and what you'd like to see in future issues. You can email me at nick@choice.com.au or contact Mary direct at mary@choice.com.au – she'd love to hear your thoughts, too.

Nick Stace, CEO
Phone 1800 266 786
Email nick@choice.com.au

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for all the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by subscriptions to our magazines, **www.choice.com.au** and from other services we supply to benefit members and consumers.

CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

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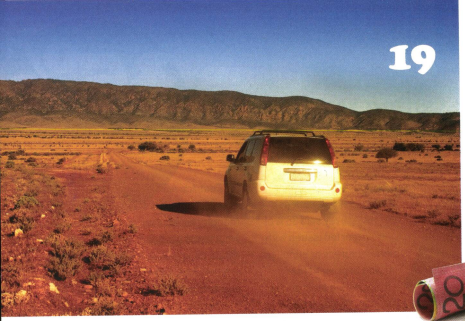

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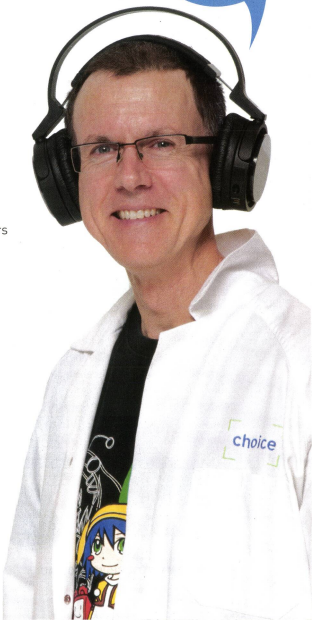
We found some leaf a little to be desired...

Which wireless headphones deliver on sound? Check out our test on page 48.



ISTOCK PHOTO

"Premiums for some homeowners have jumped 20% in the wake of the Queensland floods"

Brisbane awash on 12 January, 2011

Rising levels

In dollar terms, claims from the Queensland floods have resulted in the second-largest Australian insurance event since records began.

The Insurance Council of Australia says the industry was facing 49,400 claims and $2.31 billion in potential payouts from the floods and another $868 million from Cyclone Yasi as of April. Premiums for some homeowners have jumped 20% in the wake of the floods, and many claims have been denied on the grounds that the kind of floods events that happened are mysteriously not of the kind covered.

But the real reason premiums have gone up is more complicated. The RBA says, "Australian insurers are well placed to cope with the claims from the recent natural disasters", because insurance for the insurers – or reinsurance – "will play a significant role in capping the payouts". The trouble is the companies themselves face higher premiums from reinsurers and that cost is being passed on. **ANDY KOLLMORGEN**

Whoops!

MARCH ISSUE

- **In our smartphones test (pages 49-53), we say that the Nokia C6-00 has no touchscreen, however it has a resistive one.**

APRIL ISSUE

- **In the Sport & Leisure table on page 24, Sports Power, Lowes and Best & Less should have been ranked 3 through 5 respectively.**
- **In the Online Savings Account Award table on page 31 we say Rabobank High Interest Savings, it should have been RaboDirect High Interest Savings.**
- **The model number for the LG MCT566 mini hi-fi in our test (pages 59-61) should be FB163. The price and all other details for this are correct.**

Aldi promises clarified

In a win for consumers, Aldi has amended its pricing policy.

Responding to our story about Aldi's price promise exclusions in our April issue (see www.choice.com.au/aldipricepromise), the chain has clarified its uniform pricing policy.

In a letter to CHOICE, Managing Director of Buying Stefan Kopp says that Aldi has amended its policy wording to reflect that weekly specials are excluded. "We can listen, take feedback and prove ourselves to be the transparent, open and reasonable grocery retailer we pride ourselves to be," he continues. Before this change (which you can find on Aldi's website), the company's uniform pricing policy extended to all groceries, excluding fresh fruit, vegetables and regional bakery lines. But no mention was made of discounted special buys, which we found fluctuated in price. We asked them to change their policy to reflect this, arguing that as Aldi identifies itself as a grocery retailer, consumers may not differentiate between grocery and non-grocery lines in-store.

CHOICE CEO Nick Stace welcomes Aldi's response. "We are known for our brickbats and occasionally bouquets, but rarely does a bouquet arrive so quickly after a brickbat! All credit to Aldi for responding with lightning speed to clarify their pricing policy.

"This shows that we were on the money, that retailers take what we say seriously, and as a result we have another win for consumers," he says.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

Fishy business

As the war between our leading supermarkets escalates, they have turned their attention to sustainable seafood. In an effort to jump on the sustainability bandwagon, both Coles and Woolworths have partnered with conservation authorities to introduce sustainable fish-sourcing strategies.

Coles, which has signed an agreement with WWF, says it will introduce more-sustainable seafood options while phasing out at-risk species in its stores. Woolworths, through its partnership with the Marine Stewardship Council, has a similar plan. It's removed some at-risk fish species from stores and is undergoing an assessment of its wild caught fish to determine which are in sustainable supply.

While it sounds good in theory, some question whether it is all marketing hype.

Global standards in seafood sustainabilty are low, allowing retailers to meet requirements for sustainable supply

"Commitment from the big retailers to recognise and act on seafood issues is very commendable," says marine ecologist, Trevor Ward. "Delivering anything more than marketing spin is, however, much more complicated.

"Globally, standards in seafood sustainability are low. This can allow a retailer to meet their requirement for a supply of sustainable products, but rarely can this be linked to actual improvements in ocean ecosystems."

Removing black-listed species from sale is a welcome first step. But, if certification programs can do no more than point to the tips of the iceberg, little will change in the oceans.

EMILY MCCLUSKEY

The shocking cost of short cables

Online electronics retailer Kogan is offering those who've bought a TV from JB Hi-Fi this year a free HDMI cable. And while CHOICE hasn't tested Kogan cables, the free cable will probably work as well as one you pay for.

Prices for HDMI (high definition multimedia interface) cables are astonishing, with cables of up to three metres selling for anything from $3 to $300. Spending $300 on a short length of cable (less than four metres) is pointless: you should be able to get a good product for $40-$60. For longer cables, differences in performance may be an issue if there's significant interference, but our tests found no difference until cables were combined to form lengths more than 33 metres: see www.choice.com.au/HDMIripoff. CHRIS RUGGLES

ISTOCK PHOTO

➤ FIRST PERSON

Wake-up call

Comedian and author of *A-Z of Mummy Manners* Libbi Gorr calls out Telstra.

It's a new corporate ploy. Take some poor person in customer service and employ them as a human shield for corporate ennui. The culprit? Yet again, it's Telstra.

You must have experienced the post-"service" phone survey. "Would you mind staying on the line to complete a survey?", the hapless rep asks.

"You personally have been fine," I'm desperate to blurt. "But I've just run out of time to tell anybody."

In order to win back our respect, Telstra want to show they value us. But we are treated with a mixture of arrogance and insecurity.

If you need a house call, you have to wait for them to swing by, with not even a half-hour warning call so you can do *anything* else that day. But Telstra can call you – with a new plan, or in response to a query – at any time, and you must drop everything to be available. If it's a 6pm dinner and bath junction, there's a reluctant offer to call back. But it will be someone new, who will ask for the story right from the beginning, even though you've told it three times before.

It's not that poor call centre staffer who should carry the can as for those who set up the infrastructure and systems. What a hide!

➤MOTHER'S DAY SURVIVAL GUIDE

Gift gaffes to avoid

Want to show mum how much you love her on 8 May? Then avoid useless gadgets, wacky experiences, or presents you secretly hope she'll palm off to you.

Domestic gadgets She may have complained about kitchen messes or the trouble she had mopping the floor last week, but that doesn't mean mum wants floor-cleaning slippers or a one-handed egg cracker. Unless she's asked for it, steer clear of anything that reminds her of domestic duties. And while a portable digital breathalyser may sound like a great idea to you, the insinuation that she may need it is a little uncouth. This lesson was learnt by one CHOICE staffer's stepfather. After giving his wife a set of bathroom scales for Mother's Day, he realised that innocent intentions don't count when your gift implies she needs to watch her weight.

Presents for yourself Just because you think mum's pooch is a pain, doesn't mean she'll appreciate a doggy jail side table (see above). And, if you're thinking of getting her a heart-shaped pancake mould, think again – nothing says "cook things for me" like "time-saving" kitchen gadgets. Unless mum has a penchant for cookware, stay away. One CHOICE staffer will forever regret giving his wife a sandwich-press – "Mother's Day is now a sensitive time at my house".

Novelty gifts While many of us think that mum's sense of humour will lend itself well to a handy waistband stretcher, or a Booty Pop push-up bra for her derriere, back up the gag gift with something that shows you've put some thought into making your mum's day special.

Wacky experiences Mum's not into "stuff", you reason: a fun experience is the gift for her. If so, keep mum's interests in mind before "spoiling" her with rally-car driving or colon cleansing.

Last-minute gifts If Mother's Day rolls around and you've forgotten to get a gift, a "World's Best Mum" pen from an all-night chemist won't cut it. If only they had all-night florists – and not the kinds at petrol stations.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

Driver beware

Not all states provide the same level of cover for CTP insurance.

Compulsory third party (CTP) insurance offers protection for drivers who cause an accident that injures or kills other road users.

But what if you're at fault and are also injured in the accident? If your vehicle is registered in WA, SA, or the ACT, you'll have to rely on private health insurance, or, failing that, Medicare and social security, to cover costs and compensation for personal injury. The same rules apply if no one is at fault. Meanwhile, under the Victorian, Tasmanian and NT schemes, drivers are covered regardless of who is at fault. In NSW and Queensland, only AAMI does not provide at-fault driver cover.

But what about the prices? The ACT, with no at-fault cover and the lowest road death rate, charges $487 for CTP insurance. On the other hand, NT has the highest road death rate, and charges $474 with at-fault driver cover. While insurers are quick to point out the complex factors involved in premium calculations, CHOICE feels that this represents an ongoing imbalance in the CTP insurance system.

Motor authorities point out that all CTP insurance is subject to careful regulation and monitoring. However, depending on what state you live in, it's still a case of driver beware when it comes to CTP insurance. **BRENDAN MAYS**

Member spotlight

Lyn and Warren Kidson from Sydney, NSW, won our CHOICE Awards competition. They enjoyed a fun night of entertainment at the Australian Museum and had the chance to mingle with our winners and finalists.

How long have you been CHOICE Members?
We first received a subscription as a wedding present 45 years ago and have been members ever since.

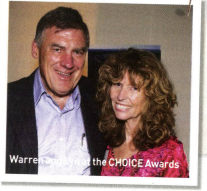
What was the best part of attending your first CHOICE Awards?
The whole night was terrific, but the highlights were the consumer champions Denis Nelthorpe and Adam Brimo.

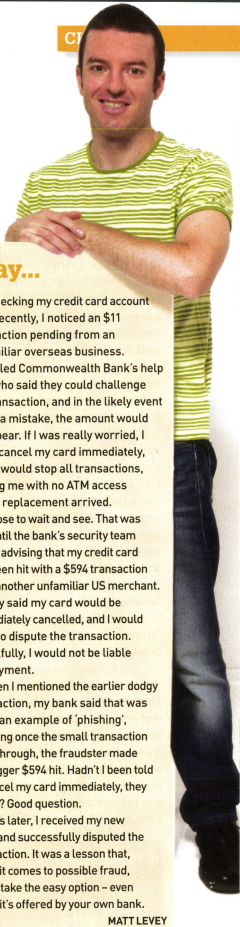
What is the best product you've purchased on a CHOICE recommendation?
There have been too many to name, but definitely a GE clothes dryer – it has lasted 25 years!

What do you do in your spare time?
We absolutely love to go bushwalking. We have a lot of different places we go but our favourites have to be around Wollongong and the Central Coast.

How does CHOICE help you?
CHOICE helps us choose and purchase the right appliances and the CHOICE Shopper service has been invaluable.

What would you like to see us test?
USB keypad calculators, because they seem to vary so much. We'd really love car tyre testing too! (Good news, Lyn and Warren – check our June issue for tyre tests.)


Warren [illegible] the CHOICE Awards



I say...

Checking my credit card account recently, I noticed an $11 transaction pending from an unfamiliar overseas business.

I called Commonwealth Bank's help line, who said they could challenge the transaction, and in the likely event it was a mistake, the amount would disappear. If I was really worried, I could cancel my card immediately, which would stop all transactions, leaving me with no ATM access until a replacement arrived.

I chose to wait and see. That was fine until the bank's security team called advising that my credit card had been hit with a $594 transaction from another unfamiliar US merchant.

They said my card would be immediately cancelled, and I would need to dispute the transaction. Thankfully, I would not be liable for payment.

When I mentioned the earlier dodgy transaction, my bank said that was likely an example of 'phishing', meaning once the small transaction went through, the fraudster made the bigger $594 hit. Hadn't I been told to cancel my card immediately, they asked? Good question.

Days later, I received my new card, and successfully disputed the transaction. It was a lesson that, when it comes to possible fraud, never take the easy option – even when it's offered by your own bank.

MATT LEVEY

➤ CAMPAIGN

Retail campaign update

CHOICE recently spoke out about online retail, arguing that the debate is about new competition and the strong Australian dollar. A number of you told us that even if GST was introduced on overseas purchases, you would still shop abroad for better prices, service, convenience, quality and range

CHOICE is preparing a submission for the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the Australian retail industry. We will be speaking out for people's right to shop where they like and expose retail practices (both online and in bricks and mortar) that are harming consumers.

We'd love to hear your comments or suggestions. These could relate to anything from how you research products before purchasing, to how loyalty schemes affect your shopping behaviour and gift cards. Email us at campaigns@choice.com.au to tell us what you think.

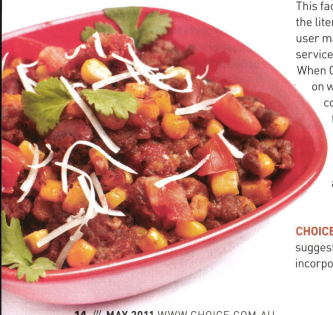
Your Say

We want to hear from you. If your experience is not good, then you can help other CHOICE members avoid scams and rip-offs. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Email us at yoursay@choice.com.au or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Happy ending

While still under warranty, our Blanco microwave oven suddenly stopped working. It was taken away and fixed, but four months later, the same fault occurred. All General Whitegoods, the repairers, who had previously fixed the microwave, only guarantee their work for three months and as the product warranty was now also up, said it would cost us $150, plus parts, for the second, offsite repair. I felt it would be better to buy a new microwave but on reflection, I phoned Blanco direct and after I'd relayed the story, they surprised me by offering a new microwave, same model, at no charge; a great outcome! After its delivery, I rang Blanco to thank them and to ask about a warranty for the new microwave. Apparently there's no warranty on a replacement item but they assured me they would "look after" me – presumably in the event of more problems, which we hope will not arise!

Rosemary Este, St Ives, NSW



CHOICE SAYS Congratulations, your experience shows how a quick phone call can be well worth the effort! Blanco says that the product warranty starts from the original date of purchase and is usually two years. If the product is replaced under this warranty, the replacement will be covered by the initial product's warranty. You have another recourse. Even if the product's initial warranty has lapsed, consumer guarantees under Australian law require a product to be of "acceptable quality" throughout its reasonable life. If it's not, the supplier should remedy the problem.

Hot connection is bone of contention

We bought an LG washing machine, model WD14030D, based in part on your test results. It has hot and cold water connections but only loads hot water for wash temperatures of 60°C and above. This fact is not described in any of the literature or the (quite poor) user manual. I had to call customer service to find out this information. When CHOICE updates its information on washing machines, you might consider getting that information from the maker's agents. Simply having a hot connection may not be any advantage if one only washes at 40°C or below, as we do.

Bob Liddelow, NSW

CHOICE SAYS Thanks for your suggestion, Bob. While we actually do incorporate the fact that the LG draws

hot water at 60°C and above in our online article, and in the magazine article when it was first released (March 2010), we will definitely consider incorporating this information into our online tables for quick reference, and to help our members with purchasing decisions.

No cheap Apples for Oz?

With the increase in the value of the Aussie dollar, I thought the price of Apple products would go down when the new phase of Apple products was released. To my surprise, Apple Australia has totally ignored the value of the Aussie dollar when it fixed the price list and Australians are paying much more than people overseas.

Andrew Kwan, Castle Hill, NSW

CHOICE SAYS Apple Australia says prices shown on the US (online) store exclude taxes, due to the varying state legislative requirements in the US. In Australia, local duties, shipping and GST combine to provide its local pricing. It claims, for the most part, Australian pricing is very similar to that in the US when these costs are taken into account.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Roaming bag

I took travel insurance with 1Cover Direct for a family ski holiday to Canada last year.

After disembarking the aircraft in Vancouver, I let my partner's nine-year-old son wheel my carry-on bag while we passed through customs and collected our checked luggage. We then went to the hotel.

However, I noticed at the hotel that my carry-on bag was missing. After the airport's lost and found department investigated, the bag was determined to be stolen. It contained quite valuable items, including a Mac Air laptop.

We made a claim for lost baggage, which was substantiated with receipts. The claim was rejected on the grounds that the bag was left unsupervised. According to the insurer, I should not have let anyone else wheel the bag.

To say I am severely disappointed and disheartened is an understatement. As an experienced traveller, I do not agree with the insurer's severe determination. Is there any way to contest this ruling?

Helen Rowland, Balmain, NSW

Helen and her family on their holiday

CHOICE SAYS The travel insurance industry has traditionally had one of the highest rates of claims rejections.

1Cover insures for accidental loss, theft or damage to luggage and personal effects. However, leaving bags "unsupervised" voids this coverage – common practice among insurers. We know of a similar case, where a claim was denied after a bag was stolen at a traveller's feet in McDonald's.

Often, a determining factor is whether the luggage could reasonably be taken without your knowledge. But under what reasonable circumstances is luggage normally accidently lost or stolen? Policy wording probably won't explain this.

You can contact the Financial Ombudsman Services on 1300 78 08 08 and ask them to step in and resolve the dispute.

In the dark over fine print

Recently, I bought a Philips energy-efficient light bulb. Despite its expense compared to non-energy-efficient bulbs, I liked its colour and brightness so much that I kept the product packaging to buy more of the same. It wasn't until I was cutting the packet up – too late to return it – that I spotted the tiny print warning not to use the bulb in an enclosed light fitting. I had read the information on the outside quite carefully prior to purchase but the warning is not visible unless the packet is actually opened. I now have a choice between a new globe and a new light fitting. I think the warning should be bigger and on the outside of the pack.

N Caldwell, Tranmere, SA.

CHOICE SAYS Some energy-saver bulbs aren't recommended for enclosed fixtures because the bulb heats up. In a confined space, this can shorten the life of the bulb. Philips says its Eco Classic range is also energy-saving and is suitable for enclosed fixtures.

With regard to the warning, Philips acknowledges this usage information isn't visible and should be clearly printed on the outside of the packaging. It says its regional designers are currently working to rectify this.

ISTOCKPHOTO

Thumbs

Joe Moharich of Taringa, Qld, wants to thank Weber for its outstanding customer service. The transmitter portion of his eight-month-old Weber Digital Meat Thermometer malfunctioned, most likely due to leaking batteries.

He contacted Weber explaining the problem, and although he had no proof of purchase, Weber despatched a replacement unit within 24 hours at no cost.

Bob Hatcher of Nowra, NSW, would like to applaud Tempo Australia's customer service. Due to supplier delays, the company wasn't able to provide Bob with a replacement vacuum hose he'd requested. They kept him well informed of supply progress and to compensate for the delay, provided the part and courier free of charge.

Vision Global Electronics (VGE) receives a Thumbs Up from **Vicky** of Happy Valley, SA. She posted a message on its website, asking for the cost of a replacement remote for the car alarm and central locking she had installed 10 years ago. VGE called her the next day and is sending out a replacement part, plus extras, all free of charge. Vicky says the consultant was very friendly and didn't mind all her questions!

The right kit

Regardless of which vaccinations you get, you'll need to take some medicines with you. Dr Deborah Mills points out "your personal medical kit should be customised for each destination", but it should always have the following:

- Anti-nausea medication and diarrhoea treatment such as loperamide.
- Minor wound dressings.
- Germ-killing antiseptics such as Betadine (povidone-iodine).
- Painkillers such as paracetamol, and cold /sinus medication.
- Insect repellent.
- Respiratory medicine if you are prone to respiratory problems.

You should also consult a doctor if you have questions about which medications are appropriate for your circumstances.

Before you leave

- Seek medical advice at least eight weeks before departure.
- If travelling with prescription medications, needles or syringes, check with the Australian embassy or mission in the countries you are visiting to make sure they are legal. Also carry a letter from your doctor stating these are for personal use.
- Keep medications in their original packaging – don't combine them to save space.
- Get your vaccinations before you go and remember that overseas medical costs are not covered by Medicare.
- Don't forget to start taking your anti-malaria pills (if directed by your doctor) and continue them while travelling.
- Pack your yellow-fever vaccination certificate in a safe place.

the expertise to know what vaccinations you should have in those kinds of travel situations. You can end up getting more shots than you need, or not enough."

Enter the travel doctor

Dr Tony Gherardin, national medical advisor of the Travel Doctor Group, a nationwide network of clinics listed by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as a health resource for travellers, says the profit motive can be a factor when it comes to travel shots.

"I know first-hand that over-servicing of travel vaccinations goes on in many GP clinics. It may be deliberate and it may not be, but either way it's totally inappropriate to give patients shots they don't need."

Most GPs don't take the time or have the expertise to fine-tune vaccinations to a specific traveller and destination, Dr Gherardin says. "Because it's not a regulated field of medicine, the kind of service you get depends on the level of knowledge or interest the GP has about vaccinations. There's a lot of potluck out there. Medicare payment arrangements do not encourage GPs to have long consultations with people, and many GPs view travel clinics as competition. Some GPs do a good job with travel vaccinations, but others are just bloody terrible."

GP Dr Deborah Mills is medical director of two travel clinics in Brisbane and spokesperson for the Travel Medicine Alliance, a travel clinic network "owned and run by doctors". She has written a travel medicine book in its 16th edition, and holds a postgraduate certificate of travel medicine from James Cook University. She says much of her travel medicine know-how comes from looking after Australian travellers for the past 20 years.

"One out of 11 Australians goes overseas every year. We tend to go to Asia because it's close – and where there are plenty of diseases. The problem for most travellers is that they really don't know what vaccinations they need. If you're just going shopping in Bangkok, you don't need a vaccination to cover all of Asia. But most GPs will give you everything just to be safe."

That can be costly, as Medicare only covers the consultation, not the shots.

The trust factor

Worse than having a GP do a bad job with your travel shots is having a dodgy travel clinic do a bad job.

"You can never be sure what you're getting," claims Dr Hambleton. And some clinics may up-sell vaccinations. "There is an inherent conflict of interest with travel medicine," he says. "You're recommending things and also selling them.

"If your trip requires a lot of vaccinations, your GP should be able to direct you to a qualified travel doctor. There are some excellent travel doctors out there who take great pride in their work."

But beware, the term "travel medicine" is often used indiscriminately and some practitioners make questionable claims.

In addition to The Travel Doctor, DFAT and the Department of Health single out Travel Clinics Australia as a health resource for global travellers. Along with recommendations from a trusted doctor or travel mate, these are worth looking into if you're planning to venture off the beaten track. ■

For more information about travel vaccinations, visit www.choice.com.au/travelvax.

Rev up your wallet!

Zoya Sheftalovich discovers the potentially pricey pitfalls of hiring a car.

Beware: damage to tyres, windscreens, the interior, roof or underbody of the vehicle, and water damage, are often excluded from rental car insurance.

Renting a car is a popular way to get around on holiday (or at home), with some companies advertising prices from $20 per day. However, there are often extra costs hiding behind an asterisk. And then there's the potentially wallet-draining cost of having an accident.

When CHOICE asked members to write in with their Australian car rental experiences, responses were mostly grim, covering dodgy credit card charges, extra fees, indecipherable contracts, insurance problems and excess nightmares.

In excess

One of the costliest "optional" extras is excess reduction, which can set you back up to $43 per day. Policies can be unclear about what they cover. CHOICE uncovered several companies that allow customers booking online to select and pay for excess reduction without informing them of vital details – such as the amount they are liable for in the event of an accident – until vehicle pick-up. A good alternative is to take out domestic travel insurance that covers rental car excess. Some premium credit card insurance, which kicks in once customers pay for car rental with their card, also offers protection. But before relying on these options, read all relevant product disclosure statements – you may be obliged to accept the excess reduction offer before you are covered.

Big seven reviewed

We reviewed the contracts and fees of seven of the nation's largest car-rental companies, and discovered dubious clauses and hidden fees and charges.

AVIS

Fees and charges: Vehicle registration, e-tag, and admin fees, and a premium location surcharge (PLS) of up to 18%.
Excess: Standard excess up to $3560, reduced to $340-$400 for up to $33 daily.
The fine print: Excess per incident, but Avis refunds the difference if the repairs cost less. The PLS and admin fee apply to final cost of hire including excess.
Verdict: Problems reported by CHOICE members were relatively minor. However watch out for Avis' policy of charging PLS on all costs, including from an accident.

BAYSWATER

Fees and charges: Interstate driving and e-tag rental fees.
Excess: $3000, reduced to $300 or $50 by paying $10-$15 per day.
The fine print: Excess is payable for each occurrence of damage, and you're liable whether you're at fault or not. When we checked their specials online, Bayswater listed a $20 per day deal and urged customers to "go straight to our Instant Quote and Booking Page", but it was nowhere to be found. A call to the Sydney office revealed that the special required a $3000 deposit, and couldn't be booked online.
Verdict: Their rates are low, but we're unimpressed with their policy of charging consumers for not-at-fault accidents.

Cautionary tale

CHOICE member David Melville rented a car from Europcar in Cairns, Queensland. When he returned it, a Europcar representative inspected the car and everything seemed fine. Later, they rang claiming there was a scrape on the front bumper. They sent a photo, but David says that the damage would have been obvious during the inspection. The car was moved to a washing facility, and the damage discovered there. But by that time it had been out of David's control for several hours. David appealed, to no avail. He was charged the excess of $400, and by the terms of the rental agreement was stuck with it.

ISTOCK PHOTO

$mart money

Finance comparison websites can deliver market overviews in an instant, but you need to know what to look for, says **Brendan Mays**.

NUTSHELL

- Use finance comparison websites to explore hundreds of products from bank accounts to home loans, but be aware of the drawbacks and approach sites with care.
- CHOICE is working with major players in the industry to help make sure consumers receive transparent information.

Knowledge is power, or so the saying goes. With the internet allowing fast access to vast amounts of information, we now have the potential to obtain information more easily than ever before. However, no matter how speedily it is delivered, information does not always translate to knowledge, and the online landscape can be a double-edged sword for the unwary.

Consider finance comparison websites. These can be a valuable tool for consumers faced with hundreds of products and a deluge of advertising, but if you don't tread carefully when using them, you might get burnt.

Fast times

There is a huge number of financial products on the market – more than 100 transaction accounts, 150 credit cards and 350 home loans on offer, just to name a few. Without a comparison website, it would be difficult to find all these products, let alone compare them.

Now, not only can you view products easily, you can also sort them based on your preferences. We examined three

leading websites, InfoChoice.com.au, Mozo.com.au and RateCity.com.au. Of these, both Mozo and InfoChoice have comparison tables that typically cover a large range of products on the market.

Using the tables

Once you arrive at the homepage of most comparison websites, you can choose a product category. This usually brings up a range of deals or "top picks" (see Deal or No Deal, page 24), and there will also be a button or a link that allows you to compare all products on the site (though you might have to search to find it if you're unfamiliar with these sites).

Mozo's credit card compare-all button.

When you compare all credit cards (for example) and the full list appears, you can then click on a card to find out more information, and even apply online However, there are a few important things to keep in mind:

- **Default sorting** Comparison tables are not always organised in the best way for your needs. InfoChoice, for example, lists credit cards according to annual fee by default (see below). This is great if you pay the full balance each month, but if not, cards with a lower interest rate might be a better option. If so, you can sort by interest rate instead (click on the relevant column header), or you can often input further data (at InfoChoice, this is done by using the options above the table) to prioritise products that are better for you.
- **Sponsored listings** Again using InfoChoice as an example, the site shows sponsored listings (products that pay for premium position) first. Other comparison websites may also show sponsored listings in other places. InfoChoice allows you to simply uncheck a box (top right) and the table will function as normal, but in general, it's important to remember that sponsored and featured listings are essentially advertising.
- **Full market comparison?** In our survey, Mozo and InfoChoice's full tables covered a large portion of the products available. RateCity's comparison tables had a few glaring omissions, such as ING's Orange Everyday from the transaction accounts table. Many comparison sites show only limited products and all sites may miss some occasionally, so it's worth checking a variety of sources to get the full picture.

The websites we looked at often allow you to tailor the way results are presented.

Quick-fix finance

While the usefulness of comparison sites is clear, there are limitations to the information provided. Each site we looked at points this out in the terms and conditions, but those looking for a quick-fix could easily miss this.

The adman cometh

Online, consumers are encountering advertising in ways never seen before, so it's a good idea to be aware of the way advertising can affect what you're viewing.

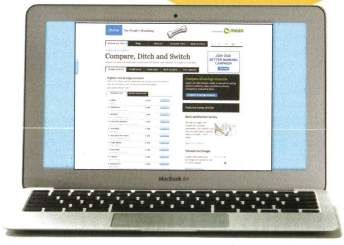
Two ways websites generate their revenue are "pay per click" and "pay per acquisition". For comparison websites, this could include when you click on links or apply for products in summary tables or as a part of a special offer. In some cases, these links can make it easier for consumers to access products, and it doesn't necessarily have to affect the content you are seeing. In other cases, however, host websites might skew the way information is displayed in order to get more clicks on the profitable links.

Good websites are transparent about advertising practice and place disclaimers about the content being displayed, but editorial decisions, based on the need to rank well in Google searches and raise revenue, sometimes blur the line between advertising and analysis. CHOICE is working with major finance comparison websites to continue improving practices in this evolving industry. However, the internet is huge and transparency could be improved for some websites.

Whether you're online or in physical stores, do your homework before you buy and make sure you're getting the full picture when comparing options. Then you'll end up with the best product rather than the best-advertised ones.

Compare, Ditch and Switch

CHOICE's own financial comparison website, Compare, Ditch and Switch was released late last year to coincide with our Better Banking campaign. Here, you can view the latest savings accounts, credit cards, home loans, transaction accounts and term deposits – all advertising-free. The website is powered by Mozo's extensive financial database, which is updated frequently to ensure you receive up-to-date and relevant information. With Mozo's help, we've adapted this technology to ensure objectivity. The market snapshots on the home page are based solely on objective criteria (just use the tabs to view a product category of your choice), or compare the entire market using the Compare All buttons.



CHOICE's Compare, Ditch and Switch at betterbanking.choice.com.au/ditch-and-switch

You'll still need to have a basic understanding of the financial products you're viewing and how you want to use them. This may be simple enough in some cases (such as a transaction account), but for home loans, the stakes are a lot higher. Always take the time to get personalised advice if you're unsure.

Forging change

Recent activity has shown that people are increasingly interested in finding a better deal from their bank. However, the time and the effort involved prevent many from acting. There's no doubt the confusing nature of some areas of finance is also restrictive.

By using finance comparison websites, people can overcome such barriers and uncover deals they might otherwise have missed. Comparison website operators argue that providers themselves are striving to keep their products literally at the top of the table. "These sites give the industry an incentive to provide a better deal," says RateCity CEO Damian Smith.

UBank's USaver promises to provide standard interest rates above several key competitors, which shows top providers know their customers are watching the market. With the right knowledge, there's no reason why consumers can't drive better deals and a fairer financial market using tools such as these websites. ■

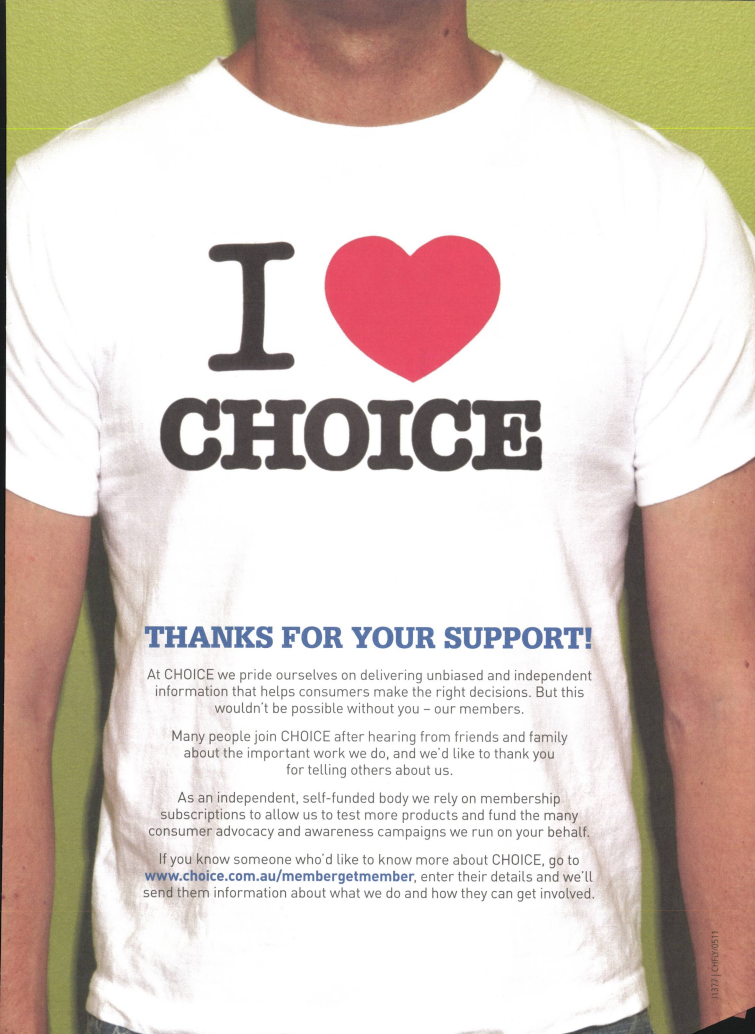
Deal or no deal?

On these sites, you'll also find summary tables or market snapshots labelled "Hot Deals", "Top Picks" or "Popular Products", among others. Below are some featuring high-interest savings accounts.

Mini tables from InfoChoice (left), RateCity (below) and Mozo (bottom).

UBank features at the top of each table, and at the time of our analysis was offering the highest interest rate (without restrictive conditions). But other accounts, such as ING Direct's Savings Maximiser (then offering a 6.35% promotional rate), are not featured. As RateCity and InfoChoice's small print indicates, only some of the top accounts on offer are listed.

This highlights the problem with any simplified market snapshot – you often can't tell what criteria are being used, whether it's relevant to you and what motives are behind the "top" product choices. CHOICE has called for these websites to continue improving transparency and table disclaimers. Keep in mind that financial knowledge is essential when considering new products, and always check out the full tables that allow you to compare *all* products.



THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

At CHOICE we pride ourselves on delivering unbiased and independent information that helps consumers make the right decisions. But this wouldn't be possible without you – our members.

Many people join CHOICE after hearing from friends and family about the important work we do, and we'd like to thank you for telling others about us.

As an independent, self-funded body we rely on membership subscriptions to allow us to test more products and fund the many consumer advocacy and awareness campaigns we run on your behalf.

If you know someone who'd like to know more about CHOICE, go to **www.choice.com.au/membergetmember**, enter their details and we'll send them information about what we do and how they can get involved.

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Locking in your livelihood

Zoya Sheftalovich shows what you should look for in an income protection policy.

Income protection (IP) insurance, which pays a proportion of your salary if you're unable to work because of illness or injury, helps with expenses at a time when there may be no alternative income. But how do you find the right policy?

Types of cover

There are three types of IP insurance: agreed value, indemnity and policies provided through superannuation.

Agreed value, the most expensive, pays out the benefit agreed to reflect your salary at the start of your policy, and is not affected by any salary fluctuations. Indemnity value policies, which are more common and less expensive, verify your income at the time of making a claim and may adjust your benefit accordingly. This can be an issue if your salary fluctuates, for example if you have taken maternity leave, worked part-time or become unemployed. Policies provided through superannuation are the cheapest, are indemnity based, and offer fewer features and less flexibility.

Agreed value, which will pay the agreed benefit regardless of your employment status at the time of claiming, is a useful option for the self-employed. For those with a regular income, an indemnity policy may suffice. Superannuation companies often accept applications without medical checks – and offer a choice for those who might otherwise not be covered.

You get what you pay for, so CHOICE recommends choosing a policy with the right level of cover for your situation.

Cost

Policies vary greatly in cost, depending on age, gender (cover for women tends to be more expensive), health and pre-existing conditions, and risk factors such as smoking and occupation.

You can pay for IP in stepped or level premiums. Stepped start out cheaper, but increase over time. Level premiums stay constant, but will vary depending on age at entry. They start out more expensive, but after 10-12 years of cover become the cheaper option. If you plan on sticking with the same provider, a level premium is better in the long term, but if you like to shop around, stepped is wiser.

IP checklist

Look for these features:

- **Benefits that continue until you are 65.**
- **Coverage regardless of unemployment.**
- **Benefits if you're unable to perform your own occupation and not just any occupation.**
- **It should be index-linked, so your future benefits keep abreast with inflation.**
- **Guaranteed future insurability, so your policy can't be cancelled if a company upgrades your risk factors.**

CHOICE teamed up with Rice Warner Actuaries to evaluate agreed, indemnity and superannuation policies. For a good agreed-value policy for a 45-year-old non-smoking male accountant with a $7500 monthly benefit, a waiting period of 30 days and cover until age 65, the monthly premium was on average $171.69 (stepped) or $258.65 (level). For a woman in the same scenario, the cost was $269.01 (stepped) or $399.97 (level). For a full table and more scenarios for some of the best policies we looked at, visit **www.choice.com.au/ip**. ■

NO ACTUAL MONEY WAS DURING PHOTOGRAPHY

Take the smart approach to your health with these ideas from **Karina Bray**.

Older & wiser

NUTSHELL

- Eating well and doing regular exercise are just two of several lifestyle choices essential for healthy ageing.
- Various targeted screens and tests are available for adults of middle age and beyond.

With greater life expectancy we have more time after retirement to enjoy travel, hobbies, and spend time with friends and family. We can also expect to live independently for longer.

The key to making the most of this is good health – and it's never too soon to start thinking about that. Protection against diseases and conditions commonly associated with ageing means taking an active role in your health earlier by making good choices. Having regular check-ups and screening can help ensure early detection too.

Healthy habits for any age

Eat well The Dietary Guidelines for Australian Adults take a whole-diet approach to disease prevention. There are few surprises, with the main guidelines being to eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits and wholegrain cereals, include lean protein and low-fat dairy foods, moderate total fat intake and limit saturated fat, salt, alcohol and sugar.

The importance of plant foods can't be overstated. Studies of populations around the world have found that people who have diets high in fruit, vegetables and legumes have substantially lower risks of cardiovascular disease (CVD), stroke and several major cancers. There's also evidence that suggests a diet rich in high-fibre cereals protects against coronary heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer.

Be active Regular exercise mitigates against coronary heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, colorectal and breast cancer, osteoporosis, obesity and high cholesterol. It's also good for psychological wellbeing and can help prevent dementia.

A good starting point is 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise at least five days a week. Adding some more vigorous activity will improve fitness and burn more kilojoules. For stronger bones, make sure at least some of your exercise is weight-bearing, such as walking, jogging or ball sports. Strength or resistance training will help prevent loss of muscle mass, which could lead to decreased independence and increased risk of falls. Yoga can help with balance – again, important when you're older – and suppleness.

Are your shots up to date?

Older people should be vaccinated against pneumococcal disease every five years and keep their tetanus shots up to date (you need a booster at age 50 if you haven't had one in the past 10 years). It's also a good idea to get an annual flu shot, which protects against the most serious and prevalent current strains.

People with diets high in fruit, vegetables and legumes have substantially lower risks of heart disease, stroke and major cancers

Targeted screening for better health

45-49 year check-up

Once only for those eligible

Your GP conducts a comprehensive health and lifestyle check to detect risks for many of the chronic conditions affecting older adults, such as type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and heart disease. Your GP must identify at least one risk factor, such as unhealthy lifestyle, biomedical risk factors or family history, for you to be eligible. About 90% of people in this age group have at least one risk factor.

75 year-plus health assessment

Every year for people 75 and older

A structured health assessment aimed at preventing or managing health issues and conditions, this also takes into account the factors that influence a person's physical, psychological and sociological functioning.

Prostate cancer (prostate specific antigen and rectal examination)

Every year for men 50-70

A man's lifetime risk of prostate cancer is about 10%, and having a family history increases personal risk. Early symptoms include a slow or stop/start urine stream, difficulty starting urination and increased need to urinate. But for many men there are no symptoms, and regular screening is vital for early detection. However, screening is controversial because the harm associated with treatment may outweigh the benefits of diagnosis.

Breast cancer (mammogram)

Every two years for women 50-69

A woman's lifetime risk of breast cancer is about 10%, and a family history may increase the risk. Warning signs include changes to the appearance of the breast and nipples, pain and/or a lump. Low-ray X-rays can detect cancers that are too small to be felt, and early detection means a better chance of cure.

Bowel cancer (faecal occult blood test [FOBT])

Every two years for people over 50

The FOBT is available as a home-based screening kit from pharmacies or online. You take two samples from your stools and send them off for lab analysis. The kit and pathology lab analysis costs $35-$40, although you may be eligible for Medicare or private health insurance rebate.

Hypertension (blood pressure test)

Once a year, especially for over-50s

Usually caused by reduced elasticity and plaque build-up in arteries, this can lead to heart disease, heart attack and stroke. Lifestyle changes can successfully control high blood pressure, especially if addressed in the early stages.

Cholesterol and triglycerides (blood lipid screening)

Every two years after age 45; more often if there are other CVD risks

Blood tests can tell you your total cholesterol levels and the levels of the main components, high-density lipoproteins (HDL, or good cholesterol) and low-density lipoproteins (LDL, or bad cholesterol). LDL leads to fatty deposits lining the arteries, which can eventually become blocked, potentially leading to angina, heart attack or stroke. Triglycerides are also measured – high levels show increased risk of CVD.

Osteoporosis (bone mineral density) scan

For women at the start of and after menopause, and men at risk

Osteoporosis affects one in two women and one in three men over 60 and can lead to debilitating bone fractures, which in turn can lead to permanent disability and death. Detected early, it can be managed or treated with lifestyle changes, nutrition supplements and/or medication.

Vitamin D deficiency

Recommended for people at risk

This can lead to bone diseases including osteoporosis. People who are house-bound, cover skin for religious reasons, have dark skin or avoid the sun are at risk.

Vision and eye health

Every two years for those over 40

Older adults are susceptible to cataracts (clouding of the lens); macular degeneration (degeneration of the central area of the retina, resulting in the loss of central vision) and glaucoma (a group of diseases where the optic nerve is gradually destroyed, usually due to raised pressure inside the eye). Your optometrist may also recommend reading or vision-correction glasses.

Type 2 diabetes (T2D) (blood glucose tests)

Every one to three years, based on risk

T2D is most common among people over 40 years. Apart from age, risk factors include obesity, especially abdominal (high waist circumference), existing CVD and sedentary lifestyle. Lifestyle changes can reduce the likelihood of progressing to full-blown T2D by more than 90% if it is caught in the early stages.

Amazingly, two products we looked at contained both bitter orange and panax ginseng, which aren't recommended to be taken together, due to an increased risk of fatal heart arrhythmias

What's in them

These products tend to be a mix of herbs and vitamins and, often, stimulants such as caffeine, which can result in high blood pressure and heart palpitations.

Herbs contain many chemicals, the presence and concentration of which can vary according to the source and the preparation. And in most of these weight-loss pills, ingredients are only individually tested for safety. They may interact with one another or with other medications.

Amazingly, two products we looked at contained both bitter orange and panax ginseng, which aren't recommended to be taken together, due to an increased risk of fatal heart arrhythmias.

Government approved?

If you think that weight-loss pills are evaluated for safety and efficacy like prescription medicines, think again.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is the body that's been charged with regulating complementary medicines. In Australia, all complementary and alternative medicines – such as weight-loss pills – need to be entered on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods. On this register there are two types of products: "registered goods" and "listed goods" – and it's important to know the difference.

Registered goods are medicines that are considered high risk – such as prescription medicines. They are evaluated by the TGA for quality, safety and efficacy before being released onto the market. Listed medicines (identified by an AUST L number) are considered lower risk and must only contain ingredients that have their safety and quality approved for use in listed products, but are not evaluated for efficacy.

Manufacturers can apply for a listing by just filling in an online form and paying a fee. Around 20% of products are randomly audited to make sure they meet standards. Manufacturers also have to hold a file of evidence to prove that their products work. Based on the literature we looked at, we suspect their "proof" is pretty underwhelming.

In 2008, there were about 100 times more listed weight-loss products than registered products – now there are probably more.

The evidence?

So, if the products aren't evaluated for efficacy, how do you know whether they are worth the money? The short answer is you don't – unless you do some leg work. We did the hard yards and had a look at the literature around the most common "active" ingredients.

Several systematic reviews have concluded that, at best, more research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

The bottom line

Overall, the current evidence for the effectiveness and safety of these products is pretty sketchy. At present, a balanced, kilojoule-controlled diet and exercise plan are still the best way to control your weight. Opting for a diet pill could mean the only thing getting lighter is your wallet. The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that if you want lose weight, see a medical professional first. ■

Sprung!

In the last six months, Australia has seen two recalls that bring into question the regulation around listed weight-loss products.

In October 2010, we saw weight-loss chocolate bars pulled from sale as they contained an unlisted ingredient, the prescription drug, sibutramine. Sibutramine, previously a leading prescription weight-loss medicine, was withdrawn from the Australian market after being associated with cardiac events such as non-fatal heart attack and stroke.

In another worrying event, the heavily advertised Latin Seed was withdrawn for containing the poisonous yellow oleander, instead of candle nut as claimed on the label. It can cause a variety of symptoms from diarrhoea to heart damage.

While these events are unusual, the fact that they do happen makes it difficult to see how the TGA can consider these products "low risk".

Those "active" ingredients

Hydroxycitric acid (HCA)

What is it? A derivative of the fruit from the plant *Garcinia cambogia*. May also be listed as brindleberry, Malabar tamarind, *Garcinia quaesita*, or hydroxycitric acid.
What they say it does Modifies metabolism, reduces fat synthesis and decreases appetite.
Can they prove it? Studies provide contradictory evidence. Some show some positive results, while others show no difference between the group taking HCA and the placebo. More comprehensive studies are needed.
Side effects and interactions None known. It appears to be safe over the short term in the doses studied.
Products: Naturopathica FatBlaster Max, Supprexxa Metabolism Formula.

Bitter orange

What is it? An extract of the Seville orange, it also known as *Citrus aurantium*. Used in place of ephedra as it contains similar compounds.
What they say it does Increases metabolism and fat burning while decreasing appetite.
Can they prove it? Limited promising evidence; more research is needed on its safety and effectiveness.
Side effects and interactions Has been linked with fainting, heart attack and stroke. It is advised that you avoid bitter orange if you have a heart condition or are taking other medications.
Products: Rapid Burn Dual Action Weight-loss System, FatBlaster and FatBlaster Max, Hershel-Beck Laboratories Xantrax.

Capsicum annum

What is it? Capsaicin from hot peppers.
What they say it does Increases metabolic rate and reduces appetite.
Can they prove it? Studies on capsaicin are interesting but mixed – one shows that having a spicy entrée can reduce your total food intake over the whole meal.
Side effects and interactions Short-term burning pain.
Products: Supprexxa Metabolism Formula.

Green coffee extract

What is it? An extract of raw coffee beans – it is believed that chlorogenic acid is the active ingredient.
What they say it does Increases metabolism and glucose control.
Can they prove it? There are some positive results from studies. However, the quality of the studies is poor, so more rigorous trials are needed.
Side effects and interactions None known, however the product safety hasn't been confirmed in a large analysis. Has the potential to increase heart rate and blood pressure.
Products: Hydroxycut Advanced, Xantrax, FatBlaster Max.

Green tea extract

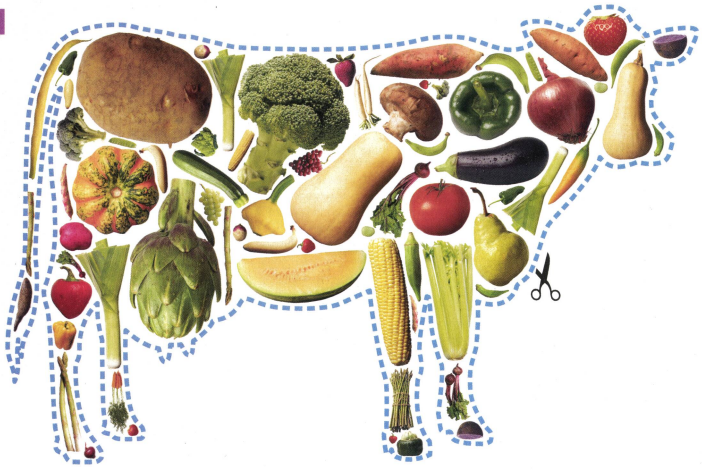
What is it? The catechins extracted from green tea.
What they say it does Reduces fat synthesis and absoption and increases metabolism.
Can they prove it? Conflicting results. Some studies suggest it needs to be taken with caffeine to be effective.
Side effects and interactions? Deemed safe. when formulated and taken appropriately, There's some concern that green tea extracts may cause liver toxicity, especially if taken on an empty stomach.
Products: Xantrax, FatBlaster, FatBlaster Max, Rapid Burn.

Chitosan

What is it? Derived from the powdered shells of crustaceans.
What they say it does Binds to dietary fat to stop absorption.
Can they prove it? Studies show varying results, with only minor weight loss shown.
Side effects and interactions If it does work, there could be malabsorption of nutrients and loose, oily stools.
Products: Rapid Burn.

Chromium picolinate

What is it? Chromium is an essential trace element commonly used in the form of chromium picolinate.
What they say it does Enhances insulin sensitivity and fat burning.
May increase lean body mass.
Can they prove it? Experts agree there's insufficient evidence to recommend it as a weight-loss aid.
Side effects and interactions No studies have reported side effects. However, it may cause DNA damage in high doses.
Products: Hydroxycut Advanced, Optislim Max, FatBlaster, FatBlaster Max, Xenadrine Ultra, Rapid Burn, Supprexxa Metabolism Formula.



Fare exchange?

If you're looking to replace meat with substitute vegetarian products, check the nutrition label – they're not always the healthiest choice, as **Rebecca Gatto** discovers.

NUTSHELL

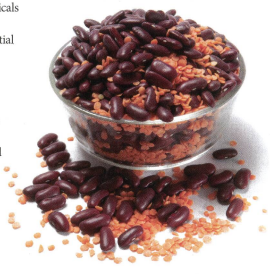
- Vegetarians have mixed feelings about these products. If you're looking to reduce meat in your diet or planning on becoming a vegetarian, they may not be your best choice.
- Some have too much salt, so look for those with sodium content less than 600mg per 100g.

People choose a vegetarian diet for many reasons, be it ecological, economic, religious, health or compassion for animals. However, some are just looking for ways to reduce the amount of meat in their diet. Whatever the reason, if you're going to eliminate or reduce the amount of meat you eat, you should take care to maintain a nutritionally sound diet. A balanced diet centred on plant-based foods can contain all the essential nutrients required for optimum health. Compared with meat eaters, a vegetarian's diet has lower levels of animal protein and cholesterol (or none if you're vegan), is lower in saturated fatty acids and higher in folate, fibre, antioxidants, phytochemicals and carotenoids. However, careful planning is needed to ensure all essential nutrients are included.

Meat substitutes are one option for those seeking an alternative to meat or an easy transition into vegetarianism from an omnivorous diet. Products range from sausages and burgers to mince, deli slices and cottage pies. CHOICE asked a handful of staff to taste a selection – the bad news is that the healthiest of the bunch (see table, page 34) don't fare very well for taste.

Pass on the salt

Vegetarians have mixed views about these products. Some enjoy the taste of meat without the guilt, while others question



Did you know?

Semi-vegetarians eat poultry and/or fish, dairy foods and eggs but generally exclude red meat.
Lacto vegetarians avoid meat, seafood and eggs but include dairy and plant foods.
Lacto-ovo vegetarians avoid meat and seafood but include eggs, dairy foods and plant foods.
Vegans only consume food of plant origin.

why they would eat something that looks, smells and tastes like meat. Our panel – a mixture of vegetarians, ex-vegetarians and meat eaters – tasted a selection of vegetarian burgers, sausages, schnitzels and snack products. If you're keen to try these products, read the nutrition panel carefully and eat them only in moderation – they're processed foods and are often high in sodium.

Australian Eatwell Lentil Vegetable Burgers were the best burger alternative nutritionally, however most of the panel rated them poor or very poor for taste. One commented that the texture was "very mushy and floury". **Frys Vegetarian Traditional Burgers** are only OK for total fat, saturated fat and sugar. The saltiness of this product stood out for the panel, and with good reason – it has a staggering 810mg of sodium per 100g.

Of the sausages, both the **Quorn** and **Australian Eatwell** are the best from a nutrition point of view. Some taste testers said that despite being plain, bland and dry, the Quorn sausages tasted like real ones. (Concerns have been raised about possible adverse reactions to Quorn products; see *CHOICE* , February 2011, page 6, for more.) For Australian Eatwell, some said they had a good taste but not at all like meat, while others were unimpressed with their "awful taste and texture".

We don't recommend any of the schnitzel products, all of which contain too much sodium to be considered a healthy option. If you're after a snack product, **Quorn Pieces** are the healthiest choice and would make a good addition to stir-fries.

ISTOCK PHOTO

Fact or fiction?

You won't feel as full after a vegetarian meal

FALSE Proteins from plant sources such as legumes, wholegrains, seeds and nuts are low GI and good sources of fibre. These foods break down slowly and release sugar gradually into the bloodstream, leaving you feeling fuller for longer.

Vegetarians have less energy than meat eaters

FALSE A well-planned vegetarian diet provides all the necessary nutrients and is equivalent to a balanced omnivorous one. Plant-based foods and wholegrains, along with fruit, vegetables and legumes, provide vegetarians with plenty of energy to get them through the day.

If you give up meat products, there's not much left to eat

FALSE There are plenty of options for vegetarians. Mediterranean and Asian cuisines are largely based on plant foods, and a recent study by the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* has confirmed that the Mediterranean diet has a wide variety of health benefits for lifestyle-based diseases. Most restaurants have options for vegetarians, and there are hundreds of books dedicated to food without meat, including how to make your own veggie burgers and sausages. Check out recipes on Cook's CHOICE for more ideas: **www.choice.com.au/recipes**.

Producing meat takes more land than producing plant foods

TRUE About seven hectares of land is required to produce the same quantity of protein from beef as can be obtained from one hectare of wheat or rice. But grains cannot be grown where soil is poor quality or there is low rainfall, so in countries such as Australia meat is grown in some of these areas.

Vegetarians are usually healthier than those who consume an omnivorous diet

TRUE Vegetarian diets are generally higher in fibre and lower in fat and cholesterol than omnivorous ones. There is growing evidence that vegetarians are less likely to suffer from cancer, heart disease and strokes, and have a longer life expectancy. People who choose a vegetarian diet for health reasons are also likely to have other healthy practices, such exercising regularly and drinking in moderation. However, an omnivorous diet that follows the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* can also provide you with all the essential nutrients for good health.

While most thought these tasted bland, they praised the chicken-like texture. **Frys Vegetarian Chicken Style Strips** get the red light for saturated fat and sodium, while **Sanitarium Vegie Delights Bacon Style Rashers** have a staggering 1050mg of sodium per 100g – almost half your upper level of intake for sodium. Our 10-year-old taster said she would recommend all the snack products to vegetarian kids, saying they're "great party foods". For the rest of our testers, the **Tivall Vegetarian Nuggets** stand out for taste.

Thinking of going vegetarian?

Making the transition to vegetarianism can be challenging, but there are a variety of strategies available. Some kick meat out of their diet immediately, while others make the transition gradually. Meat substitutes▸

Look for high protein in meat substitutes. Protein is also available in soy products, legumes, lentils, nuts, seeds and wholegrains

may come in handy here; you could use **Sanitarium Vegie Delights Mince** (see our online story for the full table of products reviewed) in your spaghetti bolognese or **Quorn Pieces** in stir-fries.

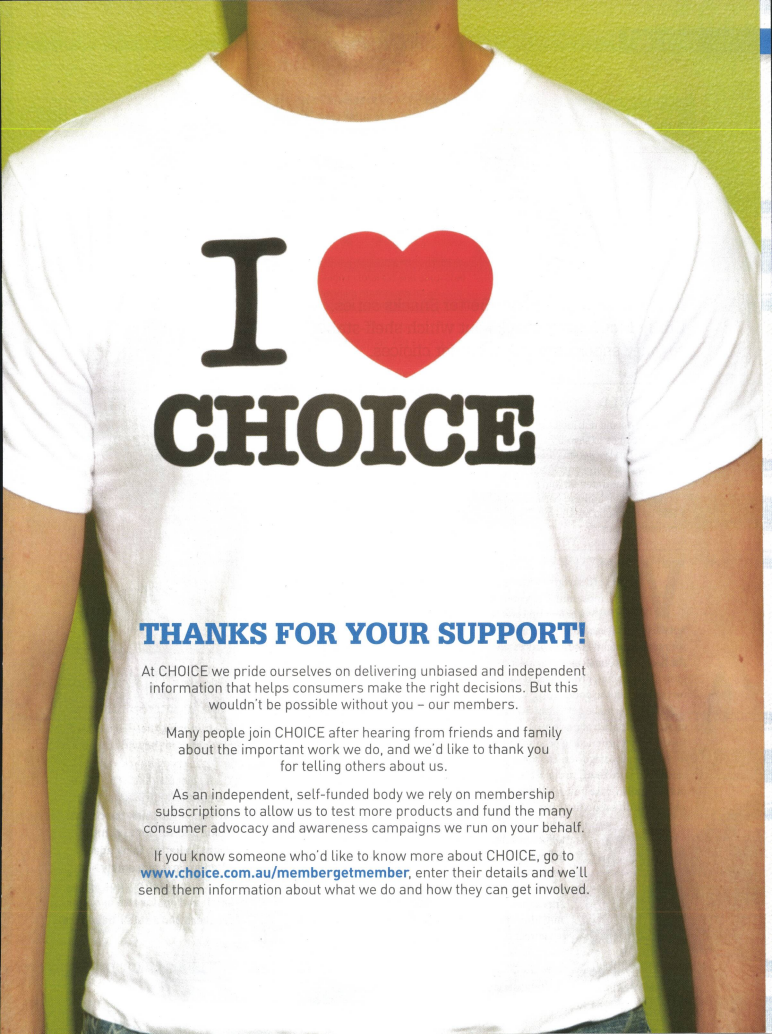
Several nutrients, such as vitamin B12, iron, zinc, calcium and some omega-3, could be lacking in a poor vegetarian diet, as these are found mainly in animal foods. Vegans are especially at risk of vitamin B12 deficiency. Its key role is in the normal functioning of the brain and nervous system and formation of red blood cells; deficiency can result in macrocytic anaemia. To counter this, vegans should eat fortified foods or take supplements. Sanitarium claims its meat substitute products are high in vitamin B12. Vegetarians who eat dairy products will get vitamin B12 and calcium, both of which are missing from a vegan diet.

For more about non-animal sources of main nutrients, see our online story at **www.choice.com.au/meatsubstitutes**. ■

	Protein (per 100g)	Energy (kJ per 100g)	Total fat (per 100g)	Saturated fat (per 100g)	Sugars (per 100g)	Sodium (per 100g)	Price ($)
BURGERS							
Nutrisoy Tofu Vegie Burgers	17.2	732	9.0 ▲	1.1 ●	0.7 ●	290 ▲	4.15
Frys Vegetarian Traditional Burgers	15.8	627	4.4 ▲	2.2 ▲	5.3 ▲	810 ■	5.49
Sanitarium Vegie Delights Not Burgers	15.5	870	7.2 ▲	0.7 ●	1.2 ●	325 ▲	4.99
Quorn Southern Style Burgers	10.2	829	10.8 ▲	2.0 ▲	1.9 ●	402 ▲	5.99
Pappa Nutal Mediterranean Gourmet Vegetarian Burger	7.6	978	8.0 ▲	0.5 ●	5.3 ▲	150 ▲	4.99
Australian Eatwell Lentil Vegetable Burgers	4.6	516	1.4 ●	0.3 ●	1.1 ●	370 ▲	4.98
SAUSAGES							
Sanitarium Vegie Delights Vegie Sausages	17.3	820	10.6 ▲	0.9 ●	1.2 ●	590 ▲	4.95
Quorn Meat Free, Soy Free Sausages	10.2	407	2.7 ●	1.2 ●	1.1 ●	510 ▲	5.99
Australian Eatwell Vegie Sausages – Chickpea and Spinach	6.4	451	0.9 ●	0.04 ●	3.5 ●	544 ▲	3.95
SCHNITZELS							
Tivall Vegetarian Schnitzels	16	755	8.0 ▲	0.9 ●	1.5 ●	700 ■	7.00
Sanitarium Vegie Delights – Tender Schnitzels	15	790	8.0 ▲	1.1 ●	1.4 ●	670 ■	4.99
Frys Vegetarian Crumbed Schnitzels	12	880	11.0 ▲	4.95 ▲	1.6 ●	600 ■	6.59
Quorn Schnitzels Cheese and Spinach	9.1	936	12.0 ▲	2.2 ▲	3.3 ●	642 ■	5.99
SNACK PRODUCTS							
Frys Vegetarian Chicken Style Strips	20.4	1000	13.0 ▲	5.2 ■	0.7 ●	800 ■	6.99
Sanitarium Vegie Delights Bacon Style Rashers	18.5	980	12.6 ▲	1.1 ●	3.2 ●	1050 ■	3.59
Tivall Vegetarian Cocktail Sausages	18	1021	16.0 ▲	1.8 ▲	2.6 ●	800 ■	5.50
Sanitarium Vegie Delights Hot Dogs	16.6	710	6.6 ▲	0.6 ●	0.9 ●	465 ▲	4.95
Tivall Vegetarian Nuggets	16	920	12.0 ▲	1.3 ●	1.5 ●	700 ■	5.50
Quorn Pieces	14.8	411	1.5 ●	0.3 ●	<1.0 ●	370 ▲	5.99

USING THE TABLE Nutritional analysis Using the energy, protein, total fat, saturated fat, sugar and sodium from nutritional information panels, we rank the products based on their protein content. **Nutrients** Based on information provided on the label. **Traffic light criteria** are based on the latest nutrition recommendations and dietary guidelines established by government health experts in Australia and internationally. **Total fat** (g/100g) ● ≤3; ▲3.1-19.9. **Saturated fat** (g/100g) ● ≤1.5; ▲1.6-4.9; ■ ≥5g. **Sugars** ● ≤5; ▲5.1-14.9. **Sodium** (mg/100g) ▲ 121-599; ■ ≥ 600. **Price (per packet)** is based on prices we paid in Sydney supermarkets in February 2011.

TASTE TEST 10 CHOICE staff members taste tested veggie burgers, sausages, schnitzels and snack foods. We didn't taste test every single product available as we couldn't get enough tasters for such a large-scale taste test, but included a representative from each brand. Each product was presented on a plain plate with no brand identification, and tasters were asked to comment on the flavour and texture.



THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

At CHOICE we pride ourselves on delivering unbiased and independent information that helps consumers make the right decisions. But this wouldn't be possible without you – our members.

Many people join CHOICE after hearing from friends and family about the important work we do, and we'd like to thank you for telling others about us.

As an independent, self-funded body we rely on membership subscriptions to allow us to test more products and fund the many consumer advocacy and awareness campaigns we run on your behalf.

If you know someone who'd like to know more about CHOICE, go to **www.choice.com.au/membergetmember**, enter their details and we'll send them information about what we do and how they can get involved.

Savoury snack ideas

Make your own snacks – don't always rely on the pre-packaged ones. This is easy to do at home using fresh ingredients. Here are some ideas for snacks you can make yourself. Keep in mind that some of them may require refrigeration:

- Air-popped popcorn
- Chopped veggies and hommus
- 30g of raw or dry-roasted nuts
- Baked beans on toast
- Bean salad

Beans and legumes

This category provides a great snack choice. Beans are a good source of fibre, are low in fat and are an important source of protein. They are also a great source of vitamins and minerals as well as phytochemicals that can help protect you from some cancers. Fortunately, there are some great convenience products in this category now available at the supermarket. This just goes to show that pre-packaged foods don't always have to be bad for you, or a compromise. You will notice that there is no worse buy when it comes to beans and legumes. That's because they are all good for you. The ones that we have chosen to recommend are really just examples of what's on offer.

BETTER BUYS

01 The Vege Chip Co. Vege Chips, including Natural, nutritional information below, 12 21g-packs

Serve size: 21g **Price:** $7.65
E: 1950 kJ **S:** ▲ 10.5
F: ■ 20.1 **So:** ▲ 560
Sf: ▲ 2 **Fi:** 0.9

It was hard choosing a better buy for chips. They are all very similar despite what the packaging says. Although you may find Vege Chips in the health food section, they are pretty close to what you will find in the chip aisle. The good thing is they are lower in saturated fat than other chips and come in a small 21g portion size. The bad thing is they are high in total fat and are also high in sodium. At the end of the day they are still chips – approach with caution.

02 Sakata Mini's Chicken, six 15g-packs

Serve size: 15g **Price:** $2.99
E: 1680 kJ **S:** ● 1.7
F: ▲ 3.5 **So:** ▲ 368
Sf: ● 0.4 **Fi:** 0.15

These crackers come in six handy portion control packs, meaning you can get your savoury fix without the temptation of a whole packet bender. They are also low in saturated fat and gluten free. The only problem is they are low in fibre. Combine them with some carrot sticks, a piece of fruit or low-fat cheese to boost your nutrient intake.

03 John West Tuna to Go Tuna dip with water crackers, four 61g-packs

Serve size: 61g **Price:** $5.49
E: 963 kj **S:** ● 1.6
F: ▲ 10.1 **So:** ▲ 596
Sf: ▲ 2.6 **Fi:** N/A

This tuna-and-water-cracker combination provides a convenient snack that you can slip into your bag or glove box. The 61g portion size means you are getting the right amount of kilojoules and the protein will keep you feeling full. The only down side is that the sodium content is a little high. A good snack option.

04 Lucky Walnuts, Cashews and Almonds, six 30g-packs

Serve size: 30g **Price:** $3.99
E: 2520 kJ **S:** ● 4.4
F: ■ 53.2 **So:** ● < 5
Sf: ■ 5.9 **Fi:** / 2.2

These raw nuts are a great source of nutrients. Walnuts are one of the richest plant-based sources of the omega-3 alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), an essential fatty acid. Almonds are an excellent source of protein, while cashews provide you with zinc. These nuts come in handy 30g-packs – just the right amount for a nutty snack.

05 SPC Baked Beans Rich Tomato, 220g

Serve size: 220g **Price:** $1.26
E: 369 kJ **S:** ● 3.4
F: ● 0.7 **So:** ▲ 290
Sf: ● 0.3 **Fi:** /// 10.6

Baked beans are an old favourite that are delicious and versatile – put them on a sandwich or eat straight from the can. They are high in fibre and nutrients, are a good source of protein and are low in fat. One of the best things is that they are affordable and are now available in different flavours – although not all sound that appetising (Baked Beans in Ham Sauce, anyone?).

06 Uncle Tobys Le Snak Corn Crackers and Salsa, six 20g-packs

Serve size: 20g **Price:** $4.49
E: 610 kJ **S:** ▲ 6.2
F: ● 2.3 **So:** ▲ 435
Sf: ● 0.2 **Fi:** 0.6

While the tiny portions won't even come close to curing your hunger, if you have a craving for a savoury bickie and dip these might do the trick. Each pack contains about seven corn crackers with a tomato-salsa dip – a snack that provides only a fraction of the kilojoules and fat of most other biscuit and dip packs. It's still low on nutrients so is best combined with fruit or vegetables.

07 Edgell 3 Beans & Corn with a Balsamic Vinegar Sachet 150g

Serve size: 150g **Price:** $2.39
E: 355 kJ **S:** ● 2.8
F: ● 1.4 **So:** ▲ 298
Sf: ● 0.4 **Fi:** /// 10.4

These bean-and-corn tubs turn potentially boring beans into a very tasty snack. They come in a handy convenience tub – just peel back the lid and pour on the dressing and dig in. They even provide the fork.

Tuna kits

Now here is a snack with potential. Tuna is a great source of protein which can help keep you feeling full for longer, and a good source of omega-3 – an essential fatty acid. Tuna snacks can also be low in saturated fat and energy – provided they aren't coated in oil or mayonnaise. Another thing to watch is the sodium content as processed tuna can contain high levels of added salt. If you choose wisely, this can be one of the best snack options.

Nuts

There's evidence nuts can lower cholesterol levels and stop hardening of arteries. Raw or dry roasted nuts are a great source of important vitamins and minerals and healthy fats. Using our nutrition key, they may not look quite as good as some other snacks, but still pack a huge nutrition punch. While they have good fats, fat is the most energy-dense nutrient, so limit yourself to a 30g handful. Avoid salted or sugar-coated nuts.

A good snack option but don't go nuts when it comes to portions

Good buys and goodbyes

Not everything's disposable these days, as our readers tell **Rebecca Gatto**.

NUTSHELL

- CHOICE readers share stories of their great old reliable appliances – including a 75-year-old phone.
- We've also heard horror stories of appliances that fail within minutes of being used for the first time.

Back in February, we asked you to share your experiences – both good and bad – of your appliances. We received about 100 stories of treasured household appliances, most with plenty of sentimental value.

Vicki Batty is the third generation to use her grandmother's 1950s Sunbeam Mixmaster to make Easter marshmallow bunny rabbits. Elsewhere, the Pryor family still use an STC fridge purchased second-hand in the 1950s. A little bruised and battered, it's been running continuously in their garage since it was passed down to them in 1972.

The oldest of the lot, however, is Susan Campbell-Wright's 1936 telephone. She has been told by numerous technicians that it cannot work with the new network system, and while it may not feature caller ID or redial, after three quarters of a century it still performs perfectly with clear sound and loud ringer.

You might wonder why some people keep their old appliances when they could upgrade to something more stylish and economical. But as Alice Papademetriou sums up when talking about her 23-year-old Goldair juicer, "it still works perfectly and we keep it for that very reason".

The good 1950 1960

1936 Telephone

1950s STC fridge

1960s Sunbeam Radiant Control Toastermatic

We had a few readers write in about their Sunbeam Toastermatics, introduced as Australia's first pop-up toaster. Margaret Howe, Ross Barry and John and Susan Balint all received theirs as engagement or wedding presents, and praise the resilience of this Australian-made appliance. Trina Phuah remembers being fascinated by the appliance as a child, and Vivian Eyers still remembers when her children would occupy themselves watching the automatic toaster grill loads of bread at a time.

1961 Kenwood Chef mixer

After seeing the Kenwood Chef Mixer at a Brisbane exhibition in 1961, Heather Van Haeringen boug her own for Christmas that year fo £40 – then equivalent to a few wee wages. The unit still works perfect She still has the original glass bow and liquidiser attachment and it ha only needed minor repairs. Fifty ye later, the design of the Kenwood C KM300 (a What to Buy in our 2009 t is similar to its iconic predecessor. this will set you back $449 – less th half the current average weekly wa

They don't make 'em like they used to

Fifty years ago, production of appliances wasn't as highly automated as it is today. Advances in technology, globalisation, trends and improved communication have been the driving forces behind manufacturing changes over the years. Consumers now have more choice, and appliances are easier to use and more sustainable and energy efficient.

International standards ensure products are manufactured to strict criteria, but this also means that some aren't always tailored to Australian conditions as they used to be. Manufacturers say that people with old appliances such as fridges and dishwashers could save money by replacing them with modern versions that use less energy and water.

These days, disposable consumerism prevails with many wanting the newest and thinnest TV or latest iPhone. But there are some who treasure their old appliances too. ■

The bad

2010 Breville breadmaker
Michael Plutte bought the ikon Baker's Oven BBM100 less than a year ago after reading our test results (see *CHOICE*, July 2010, page 41). The unit broke down after making only two loaves. He had it replaced, only for the replacement to fail after three loaves. The store took both units back, but Michael didn't give Breville a third chance. He spent an extra $50 for a Sunbeam model that's worked well since.

2011 Russell Hobbs irons
When her old iron broke down after only 14 months, Elizabeth Trudgeon turned to *CHOICE* for advice. She bought a Russell Hobbs Slipstream RHC903 steam iron earlier this year. Despite receiving a good score, this model performed towards the bottom of the group in our recent test (see *CHOICE*, February 2011, page 55). After only 20 days, the iron wouldn't start. Elizabeth had the unit replaced with the same Russell Hobbs model, and has told CHOICE that it too has broken down after only one month.

2011 Cross trainer
Georgia V bought her elliptical cross trainer from an online site on 1 January 2011. Just nine minutes after using it for the first time, the magnetic flywheel broke. Georgia contacted the store for a return and refund, and was told she needed to pull it apart and package up the 54kg piece of gym equipment – all for something that lasted less than 10 minutes! Before lodging a complaint with Fair Trading, she made a final attempt to get a refund. The company agreed to send a courier to collect it (as long as Georgia removed the unit's arms) and give her a full refund.

70 1980 1990

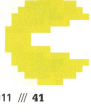
74 Kelvinator fridge
vinator fridges score
l in our lab tests and are
able (see **choice.com.au/**
iability). In 1974, Len and
'bara Grundy paid $50 for
econd-hand Kelvinator
t now serves as their
nks fridge. They bought
econd Kelvinator, a 480
st-free, in 1985. Neither
had any major problems,
d while the Grundys have
en tempted to upgrade to
nore economical model,
've been told the newer
es won't last as long.

1976 Philips dishwasher
Carolyn Koger bought her Philips dishwasher in 1976 and loves that there's plenty of space to fit large pots and tall-stemmed glasses. It's always run on a maximum load and cleans everything very well. The door seal recently needed replacing, but Carolyn can "count on one hand the number of breakages over the past 35 years". Sadly, Philips no longer makes dishwashers, and Carolyn is yet to find another model she thinks is as good.

1980s Simpson oven
This is just one of the long-lived household appliances owned by Brian Winch. In its early days, this fan-forced oven was put through its paces regularly, often running for six to eight hours non-stop. In 31 years, only a fan and an element have been replaced.

Other pieces in Brian's collection include a 1986 Hoover 920 Elite washing machine, 1970 Kelvinator air conditioner and 1963 Breville hair clippers and milkshake mixer. His secret for product reliability: "Buy right and maintain, then you won't buy often."

1984 Maytag washing machine
Merinda and Don Welsford bought this Maytag for $961 in the mid 1980s, and since then have washed more than 10,000 loads, cleaning up after kids, pets, gardening and fishing. After 19 years it was given a major service, costing $650 for parts and labour. While it may not be the most energy-efficient machine, Merinda and Don are glad it's still going strong.



Ask the Experts

Got a niggling question that one of our team can help you with?

Matt Levey

I have to add valve saver to unleaded petrol in my 51-year-old car. Can I use E10 petrol?

CHOICE sustainability expert Matt Levey replies:
It's generally accepted that vehicles built before 1986 – and later-model carburettor vehicles – shouldn't use E10 (with 10% ethanol) because of problems with materials compatibility as well as vehicle performance.

E5 (5% ethanol) in carburettor vehicles also appears problematic. In 2007, the Department of the Environment and Water Resources commissioned a study to see which vehicles can use E5 and E10. Carburettor vehicles tested on E5, regardless of age, had either unsatisfactory or doubtful performance, driveability and materials compatibility.

While most new vehicles can be safely operated on an ethanol-blend petrol of up to 10%, manufacturer recommendations will vary, depending on vehicle specifications. If you're unsure whether your vehicle can use E5 or E10 blends, check with the manufacturer or go to the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries site, www.fcai.com.au, to find information on suitability.

How long should a USB flash drive last for?

CHOICE tester Ryan Shaw replies:
The memory type, connection, case and care of a USB flash drive (UFD) are the main factors behind its longevity. We have most control over the physical condition of a UFD. The case provides some protection against physical and electrical shock, but it's best to show your UFD a little love by not dropping or otherwise mistreating it. If it's loose in a pocket or bag, keep the cap on so the connectors don't create an electric shock by rubbing against another object.

Ryan Shaw

You can expect about 1500 connections (the number of times the UFD can attach to a host computer) and about 10,000 write cycles from an average UFD. To be safe, back up files on a hard drive and use your UFD only for short-term storage and transfer.

I cleaned out my freezer and found some steaks that I had frozen 10 months ago. Are they safe to eat?

CHOICE home economist Fiona Mair replies: Food stored constantly at -18°C or below will always be safe, because freezing stops the growth of micro-organisms, which can spoil food and cause food-borne illness. Most guidelines recommend freezing uncooked steak for no more than 12 months to ensure a quality product.

With lengthy freezer storage, meat can develop grey-brown leathery spots or freezer burn, which can affect its texture and taste. Meat in supermarket packaging may be stored in the freezer for a few months, but to store for longer periods, pieces should be wrapped individually with tight double layers of plastic wrap or aluminium. Clearly label meat with the date of freezing to identify a good time to retrieve it.

Freshness also affects frozen foods; foods will taste better if they've been frozen at peak quality, compared to those frozen near their expiry date.

Unless instructions direct otherwise, thaw frozen food in the fridge or use a microwave (cook the food immediately if microwave-defrosted) and never refreeze any food you have thawed.

Fiona Mair

Ask us

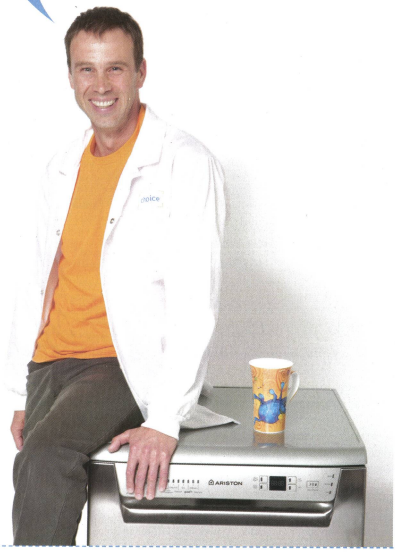
Do you have a question for one of CHOICE's experts? Email us at asktheexperts@choice.com.au or write to us at Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

ISTOCK PHOTO

We discover dishwashers that save your back, as well as your water and energy bills

Lab Tests

Dishwashers, reverse-cycle airconditioners, vacuums, headphones – they're all tested here



48

44 Reverse-cycle airconditioners
They heat as well as cool.

48 Headphones
Whistle while you walk.

52 Game consoles
Winners and losers.

55 Vacuum cleaners
Are they green machines?

58 Dishwashers
We all love a water miser.

63 Garden blower vacuums
The noise annoys ...

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where our experienced technical staff puts products through their paces. We use test methods based on Australian standards, and we develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, maintaining our independence from manufacturers, and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE SHOPPER For the best deal on products where you see this logo, call 1300 360 655. Have the model name and number, the price you've been quoted and your CHOICE subscriber number.

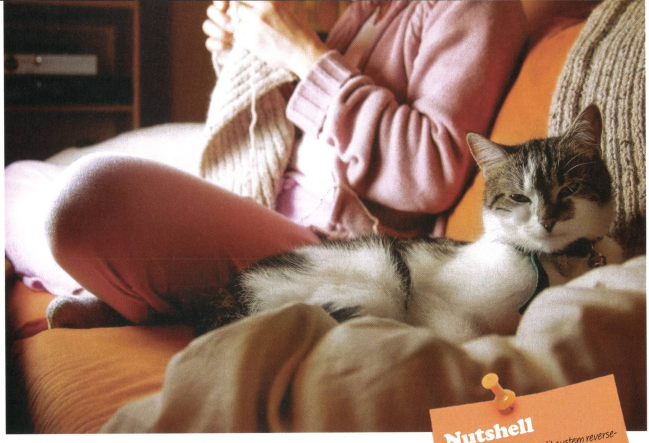
CHOICE ONLINE / CHOICE VIDEO When you see one of these tags, there is more information about this test at **www.choice.com.au**.

CHOICE BEST BUY Our testers award a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report includes Best Buys.

Best buy

CHOICE GREEN BUY Our researchers award a Green Buy to a product that delivers good quality and environmental performance. Not every product test includes Green Buys.

Green buy



Nutshell

- On test: 10 small split-system reverse-cycle inverter air conditioners, with claimed capacities of 3.5kW for cooling and 3.9kW to 4.9kW for heating, suitable for a large room or small open-plan living area.
- See page 46 for a comparison of other heating options.

Turning up the heat

Those captains of cool, reverse-cycle air conditioners, can also efficiently heat your home, writes **Chris Barnes**.

As the colder months approach, it's a good time to consider how to warm your home. Most of Australia is temperate or subtropical, but even these areas can have chilly nights. There is a wide range of heating options available, each with its pros and cons – see Hot Options, page 46.

Each type of heater has its place, but for warming a whole room it's hard to beat a reverse-cycle inverter air conditioner. These are very energy-efficient, producing up to three or more units of heating (or cooling) energy for every unit of electricity consumed, thanks to the refrigeration technology they use. Inverter models are typically more efficient than the non-inverters, as they vary their output to match room conditions, rather than simply being on or off.

The best for heating efficiency in this test are the Daikin, LG and Samsung. There are other good performers, too – see the heating efficiency scores in the table, page 46. The Fujitsu achieved an impressive 6kW heating capacity at full power (well over its rating of 4.8kW), but it uses a fair bit of electricity at this level, so didn't score quite as well for efficiency (although it still rated a good score). In everyday usage, it probably won't need to run at full power very often, so it is likely to be very efficient for typical heating usage. It also achieved the best cooling efficiency score.

As always, for maximum efficiency, you need to install a model with the correct capacity for the room. A good installer can figure this out for you, but you can use our calculators on CHOICE Online to do your own sums, too.

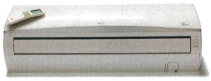
CHOICE online

To find out how we test air conditioners, log on to www.choice.com.au/smallairconditioners. You can also find calculators to help estimate the heating and cooling capacity required, and advice on alternatives to air conditioning. Type "heating options" or "cooling options" in the search box.

ABOUT THE REST

The rest are let down by their cooling and/or heating efficiencies. The Kelvinator and Toshiba have only OK cooling and heating efficiency; the DéLonghi has only borderline cooling efficiency and is just OK when it comes to heating efficiency, while the Sharp has only borderline heating and cooling efficiency.

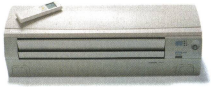
WHAT TO BUY



79%
LG R12AWN-10, $1090

Good points
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Excellent heating efficiency.
- Very good standby power consumption.

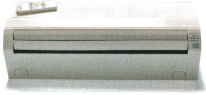
Bad points
- Smaller range of airflow than most other models on test.
- Lower reliability score than most other tested brands.



77%
Daikin FTXS35KVMA, $1051

Good points
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Excellent heating efficiency.
- Good range of airflow.
- Excellent brand reliability.

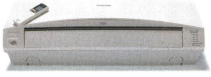
Bad points
- Comparatively high standby power consumption.



76%
Fujitsu ASTG12LVCA, $1150

Good points
- Very good cooling efficiency.
- Good heating efficiency.
- Very good range of airflow.
- Excellent brand reliability.

Bad points
- Comparatively high standby power consumption.



76%
Panasonic CS/CU-E12LKR, $920

Good points
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Very good heating efficiency.
- Very good range of airflow.
- Excellent brand reliability.

Bad points
- Comparatively high standby power consumption.
- Instructions are very brief.

75%
Samsung AQV12UWANXSA/ AQV12UWAXXSA, $770

Good points
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Excellent heating efficiency.
- Good range of airflow.

Bad points
- Comparatively high standby power consumption.
- Remote control display is small and labels are hard to read, due to low contrast.

71%
Mitsubishi Heavy Industries SRK35ZJ-S, $990

Good points
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Good heating efficiency.
- Very good range of airflow.

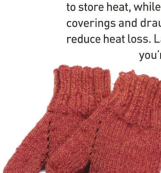
Bad points
- Comparatively high standby power consumption.
- Remote control display is small and labels are hard to read, due to low contrast.

ISTOCK PHOTO

Hot options

Before using a heater of any type, weigh up the options – some are much more efficient than others.

Passive solar design helps warm your house in winter. Living areas should face north to take advantage of winter sun, with wide eaves to keep out the summer sun. Brick walls and concrete floors create thermal mass to store heat, while insulation, window coverings and draught excluders all reduce heat loss. Last, but not least, if you're cold, then put on a jumper.



REVERSE-CYCLE AIR CONDITIONING

The most energy-efficient electric option for heating, but more expensive to buy than space heaters. Make sure you calculate the correct heating capacity for your room.

ELECTRIC HEATERS

Designed to be personal heaters or for warming small spaces, electric heaters are expensive to run for the amount of heat they produce, but they are also inexpensive to buy.

Fan models can be noisy. Their internal parts can get very hot and they have been know to cause fires; new design rules help address this problem.

Radiant bar These have bar elements that get red hot. They can be a fire or safety hazard if anything comes into contact with the element.

Column Filled with oil, these can be slow to warm up, but also don't get as hot as other types, so can be left unattended. Quiet to operate.

Convection Have an internal element or panel to heat the air. Convection and column heaters are generally more expensive to buy than fan or radiant models, but are usually more effective.

GAS HEATERS

Gas heaters are generally more expensive to buy than electric, but are cheaper to run.

Flued models have to be built in, and are comparatively expensive. They can usually be thermostatically controlled.

Unflued are portable (and less expensive), but they also vent fumes such as carbon monoxide, so must be used in well-ventilated rooms. Usage is restricted in most states.

FUEL STOVES AND FIREPLACES

These can look attractive, and are economical if you have a supply of cheap firewood (or coal). Slow-combustion fires can be as energy efficient as an electric or gas fire. Wood fires need a chimney to vent smoke and fumes, and they require cleaning. Check local regulations before you buy.

Ethanol fireplaces use methylated spirits and don't need vents or flues. They cost a few hundred dollars, but

	PERFORMANCE							SPECIFICATIONS				
								Maximum capacity (kW)				
	Overall score (%)	Cooling efficiency score (%)	Heating efficiency score (%)	Airflow score (%)	Standby power score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Noise indoor* / outdoor	Measured cooling	Measured heating (at 7°C outdoor temperature)	Rated heating (at 7°C outdoor temperature)	Dimensions indoor unit (H x W x D; cm)	Dimensions outdoor unit (H x W x D; cm)
LG R12AWN-10	79	78	91	67	88	70	quieter / quieter	3.4	4.1	4.0	29 x 88.5 x 22	55 x 86.5 x
Daikin FTXS35KVMA	77	74	96	74	50	75	quieter / quieter	3.3	4.0	4.0	30 x 79 x 21.5	55 x 76.5 x
Fujitsu ASTG12LVCA	76	84	79	80	38	71	medium / medium	3.9	6.0	4.8	29.5 x 78.5 x 23	54 x 79 x 2
Panasonic CS/CU-E12LKR	76	76	82	86	57	65	quieter / quieter	3.2	4.7	4.9	29 x 86.5 x 21	55 x 78 x 2
Samsung AQV12UWANXSA/AQV12UWAXXSA	75	72	91	73	59	65	medium / quieter	3.3	4.0	4.0	28.5 x 88.5 x 21.5	55.5 x 88.5
Mitsubishi Heavy Industries SRK35ZJ-S	71	71	72	81	56	63	quieter / medium	3.6	5.0	4.0	29.5 x 79.5 x 23.5	54 x 78 x 2
Kelvinator KSV35HRB	67	60	65	66	91	73	medium / medium	3.3	4.2	3.9	30.5 x 85 x 23.5	59 x 76 x 2
Toshiba RAS-13SKV-A/RAS-13SAV-A (A)	65	61	69	70	62	63	quieter / medium	3.4	4.7	4.2	27 x 78.5 x 21	55 x 78 x 2
DeLonghi DEINV35AUP	60	47	57	75	82	65	medium / medium	3.3	4.1	4.0	27 x 84 x 18.5	54 x 84.8 x
Sharp AC12RMCSYS (A)	58	53	50	63	82	68	medium / medium	3.4	4.4	3.9	28.5 x 86.5 x 18.5	54 x 84.8 x

USING THE TABLE Scores Overall score is made up of: Cooling efficiency: 35%; Heating efficiency: 25%: Airflow: 20%: Standby power: 10%: Ease of use: 10%. Cooling efficie weighted more than heating, because in Australia reverse-cycle units are used more for cooling than heating. We've rescaled the scoring from previous tests, as some new r are more efficient. Efficiency scores are comparative rather than actual electrical efficiency; a model scoring 90% has excellent efficiency, 70% is good and 50% is borderline **Measured capacity** Reverse-cycle air conditioners are sold with rated heating and cooling capacities. We test them at maximum thermostat and fan settings. Highest capaci measured is shown. **Annual running costs** We calculate what each model costs to deliver 1000kWh of full cooling, 1000kWh of partial cooling and 2000kWh of heating per ye

are more expensive to run than a comparable unflued gas heater.

CENTRAL HEATING

The most expensive option in terms of installation and potentially also to run. But many central heating systems can be set to heat just the rooms required.

Ducted reverse-cycle air conditioning Uses a compressor and ducts in the rooms you want to heat or cool. It's efficient, but installation can be costly.

Underfloor heating Wiring or water pipes in the slab are heated, using off-peak electricity or hot water.

Ducted gas heating Uses a gas furnace (outside or underfloor) and vents in the rooms you want to heat.

Slow-combustion stove with heat shifters A slow-combustion heater, connected to a system of ducts and fans in the ceiling space.

CEILING FANS

Warm air rises, so a reversible ceiling fan helps distribute it more evenly.

RES				COSTS	
Quiet operation	Fan-only mode	Sleep mode	Contact	Yearly running cost ($)	Price ($)
	√	√ (B)	lge.com.au	192	1090
√	√	√ (B)	daikin.com.au	200	1051
√	√	√ (B)	fujitsugeneral.com.au	214	1150
√			panasonic.com.au	209	920
	√	√ (B)	samsung.com/au	208	770
	√	√ (B)	mhiaa.com.au	239	990
	√		kelvinator.com.au	241	790
√	√	√ (B)	toshiba-aircon.com.au	248	1354
	√	√	delonghi.com.au	273	725
	√	√	sharp.net.au	283	1050

mum capacity, with the rest of the year in standby mode on electricity costs of 20 cents/kWh). **Price** RRP Dec
ABLE NOTES (A) Discontinued, but may be available at tores. * Lowest fan setting. ** Not including quiet and fast on speeds. **(B)** With automatic temperature adjustment.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Energy efficiency The more stars, the lower the running costs and the greenhouse gas emissions. Star ratings differ for heating and cooling.

Automatic de-icing Frost may build up on the outdoor heat exchanger coils in winter if the unit doesn't have this function (all these models have it).

Noise Most local councils have noise restrictions which relate to the use of air conditioners. Check these before buying, especially if the unit needs to be installed near a neighbour's house. In this test, the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries is the quietest indoor unit (on its lowest fan setting).

Fan speeds Look for a model with a wide airflow range (models with a wide range have higher airflow scores in our test) and multiple fan speeds.

Filters Cleaning these regularly helps the unit run more effectively. All the tested models have mesh filters that are easy to access and remove. All but the Daikin, Panasonic and Sharp also have purifying filters; these are easy to remove and replace for the Kelvinator and Toshiba, but are fiddly in the rest.

Operating modes

- **Auto** Automatically chooses the mode required to keep the room at the chosen temperature.
- **Cool** Pumps heat from the inside to the outside.
- **Heat** Pumps heat from the outside to the inside.
- **Dry** Dehumidifies the air, while cooling only slightly.
- **Fan only** Blows air without heating, cooling or drying. This can be useful when all you want is a cooling breeze.
- **Timer** This lets you switch the air conditioner on and/or off automatically. All the models on test have timers.

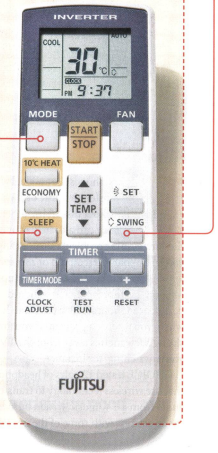
Remote control Look for large, well-spaced buttons and a big, easy-to-read LCD screen.

Airflow control Some models have settings with reduced and/or extra-high airflow.

Sleep mode adjusts the temperature to a comfortable level for sleeping so the unit doesn't work as hard. You can program how long you want the sleep mode to operate. All models, except the Kelvinator and Panasonic, have a sleep timer to shut off after a set time, but not all automatically adjust the temperature – see the table, left.

Adjustable or oscillating louvres allow the air to be distributed more evenly. Point them up for cool air and down for warm; this can be done via the remote for all models on test. Left and right adjustability helps direct air where it's needed.

Restart delay prevents the air conditioner from starting up again too soon after being switched off.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Earcup type The headphones on test include models that sit on your ear (on-ear) and others that fully enclose the ear (over-ear). Unlike open headphones, closed headphones seal the audio within the earcup and stop the audio from escaping – an ideal choice if you want to listen to TV or music without disturbing others in the room. However, when using closed headphones the ambient sound is also blocked out to some degree. All the models on test are closed headphones, except for the Jaybird and Sennheiser RS 110.

The charging dock recharges the headphones when they are placed on the base. All models can recharge the batteries, except the TDK WR700 and Sennheiser RS110, although you can use your own rechargeable batteries for these headphones. Our testers rated the AKG headphones worst for aligning the headphones to the charger, finding the process very fiddly, while the Sennheiser RS170 was easy to operate, with the charging pins automatically lining up when placed upon the cradle.

Multi-channel setup allows for different channels to be used. For example, if two people in the same household use wireless headphones for different devices, such as a TV in one room and a computer in another, the headphones can be set to different channels so that they don't interfere with each other. All headphones that use an RF transmitter (see Transmission Technologies, opposite) support multi-channel setup.

ABOUT THE REST

The most expensive **Philips** headphones, the **SHD8600**, are easy to use, are OK for audio performance and overall comfort and have an excellent range using a digital FM transmitter, making them a good option if the audio signal has to travel into the next room. The **SHC5100** are comfortable to wear and easy to use, but their audio performance is not as good as most of the other models on test and the range for the analog FM transmitter is much lower than claimed. The **SHC2000** delivered borderline performance, as you might expect for $80 wireless headphones, and are the only model on test using infra-red to transmit audio (see opposite). To operate them, you need to be in the same room as the audio player and have no objects between the transmitter and user.

The **Creative Labs** and **Jaybird** Bluetooth headphones may be a good option if you want a set of headphones for listening at home as well as enjoying music on your iPod or smartphone when commuting to work. We found the Creative Labs set to be very good value overall as they're easy to use when changing song tracks and have good audio performance. They're also more comfortable to wear for long periods than the Jaybird, but much less comfortable than the top-scoring Sennheiser models.

The **TDK** headphones are as portable as the Bluetooth models, using a small digital FM wireless dongle that plugs into the 3.5mm jack of the music player. While our users found them comfortable, their audio quality was among the worst on test.

The **Sennheiser RS 110** deliver OK audio and are very comfortable. However, you need to use your own rechargeable AAA batteries as a charger is not included. We also found the range to be a lot less than claimed when tested indoors, although we did achieve a range of about 60m when we tested outside.

The **Sony MDR-RF4000K** deliver very good audio quality, but our trialists found them to be the least comfortable over long periods and some found the charging cradle fiddly to operate. The **Sony MDR-RF925RK** are easy to use and more comfortable than most models on test but have the second-worst sound.

	PERFORMANCE		
	Overall score (%)	Audio performance (%)	Comfort score (%)
Sennheiser RS 170	87	87	91
Sennheiser PX 210 BT	86	87	81
Creative Labs WP-300	77	74	62
Philips SHD8600	74	65	63
Sony MDR-RF4000K	72	80	53
Sennheiser RS 110	71	62	84
Jaybird SB2	69	69	59
AKG K 912	68	63	57
TDK WR700	68	52	73
Philips SHC5100	66	52	79
Sony MDR-RF925RK	62	51	75
Philips SHC2000	54	43	62

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Audio

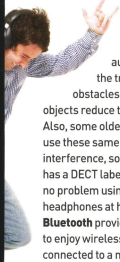
Transmission technologies

Audio signals for wireless headphones use one of the three following technologies:

Infra-red (IR) headphones have the lowest range and also suffer from audio degradation when not in a clear line of sight between the transmitter and audio device.

Radio frequency (RF) Several of the models on test use a radio frequency on either a digital FM (2.4GHz) or analog FM (900MHz) band. RF headphones transmit audio up to 100m from the transmitter. However, obstacles such as walls and large objects reduce their reception quality. Also, some older cordless phones use these same frequencies, causing interference, so check your phone. If it has a DECT label (1.8GHz), you'll have no problem using a pair of RF wireless headphones at home.

Bluetooth provides you with the freedom to enjoy wireless sound at home if it is connected to a music system or TV via a Bluetooth dongle. You can also listen to music or even enjoy a movie on your smartphone or tablet (if it supports Bluetooth). Most devices support a wireless range of at least 10m, with our tester achieving more than 40m using a Bluetooth dongle. However, while most new mobile phones support Bluetooth, not all support the Bluetooth profile required to play stereo and control track selections. Check for terms such as A2DP or AVRCP in the Bluetooth specification to see if your phone, music player or TV can be used without a Bluetooth dongle. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

Range score (%)	Reception degradation score (%)	Earcup type	Earmuff material	Transmitter type	Multiple headphone support using one transmitter	Claimed range (m)	Measured range (m) *	Claimed battery life (hours)	Headphone weight with batteries (g)	Type of charger	Contact	Price ($)
82	100	Closed over-ear	Polymer	Digital FM	yes up to 4	80	68	24	251	Transmitter base station / cradle	sennheiser.com.au	449
100	52	Closed on-ear	Polymer	Bluetooth		10	31	12	111	Plugpack AC adapter	sennheiser.com.au	399
100	90	Closed on-ear	Polymer	Bluetooth		10	43.5	8	108	USB cable only	creative.com	150
100	95	Closed over-ear	Polymer	Digital FM		30	67	10	245	Transmitter base station / cradle	philips.com.au	250
90	76	Closed over-ear	Polymer	Digital FM		30	30	7	306	Transmitter base station / cradle	sony.com.au	299
40	71	Open over-ear	Cloth	Analog FM		100	11	22	216	No charger included	sennheiser.com.au	199
100	29	Open on-ear	Foam	Bluetooth		10	40.5	8	106	USB cable only	audion-mm.com	130
92	52	Closed over-ear	Cloth	Analog FM		50	51.5	15	293	Transmitter base station / cradle	audioproducts.com.au	170
100	29	Closed on-ear	Polymer	Digital FM	yes up to 4	10	18	40	184	No charger included	tdk-media.com.au	149
40	62	Closed over-ear	Cloth	Analog FM	yes	100	12.5	10	200	Transmitter base station via cable	philips.com.au	130
100	52	Closed over-ear	Cloth	Analog FM		45	59	18	305	Transmitter base station via cable	sony.com.au	149
82	14	Closed over-ear	Cloth	Infra-red	yes	7	6	15	231	Transmitter base station via cable	philips.com.au	80

nance: 40%; Comfort: 20%; Ease of use: 20%; Standby: 10%; Range: 5%; Reception degradation: 5%. **TABLE NOTES** * All Bluetooth models were tested with the Sennheiser BTD 300 transmitter.

FITNESS PROGRAMS

The **Wii Fit Plus ($150)** helped drive fitness in the home with the Wii Fit Plus program and balance board selling 2.2 million units in its first month and with well over 13 million units sold so far. With more than one million Australians using Wii Fit, there is no doubting its popularity.

Exercises cover cardio, strength, coordination, flexibility and balance, with a few relaxation exercises. If you find the intro repetitive, you can skip it, but you may want to do your own warm-up before starting the program, as the Wii Fit jumps straight into the exercises.

The balance board provides a useful point of reference for keeping the appropriate balance. However, as it doesn't register the movement of the body, only the feet, there are always opportunities to cheat if you want to reduce the workload.

How it rates

13-18 years **GOOD**
20-35 years **BETTER**
50-70 years **BEST**

Sony's **Get Fit with Mel B ($59)** is best suited to younger gamers or experienced gym users, with goal-focused exercises, such as Bikini Fit, Lose a Dress Size or New Year, New Start, and plans the appropriate program. But there is not much instruction on the processes involved, with the program jumping straight into the workout, although it does include a warm-up phase. The program also provides information on a healthy diet, with recipes included.

The ability to position yourself next to a very fit-looking Mel B using the camera while you are training may be either positive and motivating or deflating, depending on your outlook. The side-by-side comparison provides a good indication on how to do the workout correctly, but altering the program is difficult without having to recalibrate the Move controller.

How it rates

13-18 years **GOOD**
20-35 years **OK**
50-70 years **BEST**

The **Kinect Your Shape Fitness Evolved ($79)** should be the ideal solution for anyone who is tempted to cheat at their workout, as the motion control system maps your whole body and should therefore be able to recognise when your body is not doing what it should be. It is easy to use and a particularly good option for beginners.

However, the sensor sometimes has difficulty recognising fast movement, with a bright room needed for optimal performance. Wearing tight-fitting clothing may help the sensor get accurate readings of your body's movement. ■

How it rates

13-18 years **GOOD**
20-35 years **BEST**
50-70 years **BETTER**

The ability to position yourself next to a very fit-looking Mel B while you are training may be positive or deflating, depending on your outlook

Nutshell

- Vacuums with bags generally performed better than those without.
- Recyclable parts and reduced power consumption are good, but excellent long-term reliability could be the best step towards making a greener vacuum.

Greener cleaners?

Vacuum manufacturers are claiming to spruce up the planet with eco-friendly options, writes **Chris Barnes**.

For CHOICE vacuum cleaner tests, we divide the market into three categories, low-cost, mid-priced, and high-end, to fairly compare apples with apples. The mid-priced models, which fall into the $300 to $500 price range, consistently give the best performance for price; while you'll find some better performers in the high end, they are often only a few points ahead, and can cost hundreds more.

This test of mid-priced vacuums again proves the value-for-money principle – and one brand nearly blitzes the category.

We also find vacuum manufacturers are pushing the eco angle – but are they just trying to suck us in with these claims?

Planet-pleasers

Some manufacturers are taking steps to make their vacuum cleaners greener. Many have recyclable parts: the Nilfisk Extreme Eco claims to be 95% recyclable and the Electrolux Green Ultra Silencer claims to be made from 55% recycled plastic. Both also claim lower electricity consumption without loss of performance, and our tests bear this out. They have the lowest power usage of all the models on test (see the table, page 56), but both achieved a good score for dirt removal from carpet. They missed out on being recommended, due to lower scores for pet hair removal.

To find out how we test vacuums, go to www.choice.com.au/midpriced vacs

Bag vs bin is another aspect to consider. Bin (bagless) models have lower ongoing costs, both to the environment and your hip pocket, and the dust can be easily dumped into the garden or compost (but this might not be an option for apartment dwellers, who could find bags a more convenient option).

However, bin models aren't necessarily better performers – in fact they tend to be outperformed by bagged models in our tests – and if you don't replace the filters regularly, their performance can reduce over time. This is also true for bagged models; however, these have the advantage that the bag is a major part of the filtration process, which is replaced each time you put in a new bag.

But perhaps the most important sustainability aspect of any appliance is whether it will still be going strong after several years of use without needing replacing. Our brand reliability surveys rate Miele, Kirby and Dyson as the most reliable vacuum cleaner brands, with Panasonic, Volta, Electrolux and Nilfisk also rating well. Hoover and Wertheim rate significantly lower for reliability.

ABOUT THE REST

Most models not featured in our What to Buy list (page 56) are good overall but are let down by performance in particular areas or ease of use. The Nilfisk Power Allergy P40, Samsung, Vax and Hoover Freedom Bagless are only OK for dirt removal from carpet. The Samsung and Hoover are also only OK at cleaning corners and edges. The Nilfisk Extreme Eco, Electrolux Green Ultra Silencer and Ultra Silencer are borderline at removing pet hair, but well worth considering if you don't have pets.

Nutshell

- A new compact model makes the recommended list.
- We add two more unique configurations that are more ergonomic to use.

Out of the box

A good back is no longer a prerequisite for operating a dishwasher, as **Martha Psiroukis** discovers.

Although there haven't been any groundbreaking innovations in dishwasher design, we are seeing more versatile options and new configurations, allowing them to be installed in positions that make them easier to access.

Many years ago, we began assessing the single and double Fisher & Paykel DishDrawer series, which the company has now added to with its TallDrawer and extra-wide versions (in our next update). We recently tested the V-Zug Adora, which can be mounted on a higher plinth for easier access, and the compact Omega benchtop option for small loads and limited installation space. For this test, we've included the extra-wide, but short, full-sized Smeg STH903, and the compact Bosch SKE53M05AU – both can be installed at a more accessible height.

These Bosch and Smeg designs are particularly good for galley-style kitchens, thanks to their short doors – only 36cm each. But you will need at least an 86cm-wide space to slot in the Smeg, whereas the Bosch fits in a standard 60cm. Installing just under the benchtop would be better for most people, but the Bosch can also be installed above the benchtop.

The Smeg is good overall, fits a 12-place setting in the one wide basket, and you can designate one side for a more intensive wash. Its width means you can fit in extra-large items. For more on the Smeg, see About the Rest, page 62. The Bosch is also a good overall performer and makes our What to Buy list. Installing two smaller units gives you the option of a full-sized dishwasher when you need it. And since they function independently, you can wash pots in one and delicate glasses in the other.

Reliability

See *CHOICE*, May 2010, page 16, for results of our latest reliability survey, or go to www.choice.com.au/appliancereliability.

Installing two smaller units gives you the option of a full-sized dishwasher when you need it. And since they function independently, you can wash pots in one and delicate glasses in the other

WHAT TO BUY

STANDARD

81%
Siemens SN56M532AU/08, $1849

This semi-integrated, top-performing model has the highest overall score and is an excellent water-efficient product. It is one of the lowest users of water for a full-sized model, is energy efficient, and it washes and dries well. Features include a child-lock on the controls, delay start and time-to-go display, as well as an easy-to-lift top basket that can be adjusted when loaded. It lacks an eco-wash program.

78%
Asko D5131, $1149

This built-in model has fan-assisted drying, scores well for water efficiency and washing, and is also relatively cheap. But it's only OK for energy efficiency, has a long run time and is relatively noisy. Features include a child-lock on the door, cutlery basket that can be placed anywhere in the front of the bottom rack, time-to-go display and delay start.

77%
Bosch Classic Electronic SMS50E12AU/07, $1249

This freestanding model has excellent water efficiency, is very energy-efficient, and good for washing. It's relatively quiet, very cheap to run, and has a child-lock on the door. But it's only OK for drying and has a long program time. The technically similar Bosch Classic SMU50E15AU is available for $1249 but it's stainless steel and needs to be built in.

COMPACT

75%
Bosch SKE53M05AU, $1199

This built-in six place-setting model is very energy efficient and very good at drying. It scores well for washing, but is only OK for water efficiency, and has a long run time. Features include a child-lock on the controls, time-to-go display, delay start, and its cutlery basket can be placed anywhere.

SLIMLINE

74%
AEG Electrolux F65411VI, $1639

This fully integrated nine place-setting slimline model is excellent at drying and scores well for washing, but is only OK for both energy and water efficiency. Its features include a top basket that can be adjusted when fully loaded, a time-to-go display and delay start.

Accessibility

Using Independent Living Centre guidelines, our testers assess the models for people with disabilities. These are the best options in this test:

- For wheelchair users, any of the single drawer or compact types, and the **Smeg STH903** can be installed at a suitable height.
- For people with upper limb dysfunction – the compact **Bosch SKE53M05AU**.
- For people with vision impairment – all newly tested **Miele** models and the **Blanco BFD10XP**.
- For people with cognitive disability – the **Ariston LFF 825 X**, the three new **Miele** and two new **Bosch** models are all good options.

For more on what to look for, see **www.choice.com.au/access**.

ABOUT THE REST

Only the newly tested models are listed here. To find out more about previously tested ones, see the table on pages 60–61.

The **Bosch SMS65M08AU/25** has excellent water efficiency, is very good for drying, and good for energy efficiency too, its cutlery basket can be placed anywhere in the lower rack, and it has a child-lock on the doors and the controls. However, washing performance is only OK, and it has a long program time.

The three **Miele** models on test come from the same series but some have more features. The freestanding **Miele G 5300 SC** is excellent for drying and has very good water efficiency. It has a child-lock on the door, easy-to-lift top basket, time-to-go display, delay start and a standard cutlery tray.

The **Miele G 5500 SC** performs similar to the 5300 SC but includes additional features such as an auto sensor program, and an adjustable cutlery tray.

The middle panel can be lowered to hold large utensils, or the side panels slide across to accommodate tall glasses below.

At the premium end is the **Miele G 5775 SCVi XXL** which is a similar performer to the other two – but its drying and energy performance is a tad better. It also accommodates 15 place settings, has an extra large internal tub for larger items, a half load option, and it automatically opens the door at the end of the cycle to enable an almost perfect drying result every time.

The **Smeg STH903** is very water efficient, very good at drying, good for energy efficiency, has delay start, and a half load option. However it's only OK for washing, doesn't have an auto wash, no time-to-go display, and our testers found it difficult to load the standard place setting due to limited space. Particularly difficult was positioning the dinner plates at the rear under the cutlery racks (which they found to be quite sharp). Most users won't be loading a standard 12 place setting so this may not be an issue, and you can remove these additional cutlery racks.

The **Ariston LFF 825 X** is excellent at drying, is very water efficient and its cutlery basket can be placed anywhere in the lower rack, has a half load option and an auto wash. But it's only OK for washing and energy efficiency, and although the top basket is height adjustable, you have to remove it to reposition it.

The **Blanco BFD10 XP** is very water efficient, good for washing, has auto wash, easy-to-adjust top basket, time-to-go display, delay start, but is only OK for energy use, and borderline for drying.

The **Technika TDX 8SS** is very good for energy and water efficiency, has delay start, half-load option, and easy-to-lift top basket. But it's only OK for washing and poor for drying, and it has no auto wash or time-to-go display.

The **Samsung DMS 400 THX** is very water and energy efficient, and has a child-lock on the controls, easy-to-adjust top basket, time-to-go display, and delay start, but its poor for drying performance and has no auto wash. ■

How we test

See *CHOICE*, September 2010, page 53, or go to www.choice.au/dishwashers to see how we test.

ATURES		
Easy-to-lift, height-adjustable top basket		Fold-down/
✓		F
		F
✓		F
✓		F
✓		F
✓		F
		F
✓		F
✓		F
✓		F
na		F
		F
✓		F
✓		F
✓		F
✓		F
		F
✓		
na (E)		F
✓		F
✓		
		F
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✓		
		F
✓		F
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		F
✓		F
✓		
✓		F
✓		F
na		F
✓		F
na (E)		F, F
na (E)		F
na (E)		
✓		

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Will your normal dinnerware fit into the dishwasher without crowding or hitting the spray arms? Take a few large dinner plates and tall glasses to the store, to check they both fit at the same time. Spin the spray arms to make sure they don't hit anything.

Auto programs are designed to optimise the amount of energy, water, time and temperature needed. But our research shows very few of these actually work.

Easy-to-lift height-adjustable top basket Almost all top baskets are height-adjustable, but if it is an easy-adjust system you can do this without removing the basket. Only a few can be adjusted when loaded. But larger internal tubs often denoted by XL or XXL in the model number means that adjustable baskets may not be required – but they still can improve versatility.

Fold-down/removable racks can help when loading pots and awkward items. Fold-down types are easier as they don't need external storage when not in use.

An **anti-flood hose** has an electric cut-off near the water tap connection, which means it stops leaks in the hose, not just in the machine.

Half-load option is a program or option that may save water, time and energy when washing half a load. Models with auto program/dirt sensor should automatically do this.

Cutlery trays are no longer exclusive to Miele models. Trays are good for large utensils, and cutlery can be grouped on the tray as you load the machine, making unloading easier (but you can do this with baskets too). They may be safer by reducing the risk of stabs from knives and forks in standard cutlery baskets. Also worth noting is that machines with cutlery trays tend to have shorter heights between racks, which may be a problem if you have tall glasses and larger plates – again, always check before buying. However this isn't a problem with Miele's new premium range, see About the Rest, above, for more.

Nutshell

- A basic safety kit of earmuffs and goggles are essential when using a blower vac.
- Neither electric nor petrol models perform significantly better than the other, but electric is a little easier to use.

Noisy neighbours

Garden blower vacs make short work of your leaves, but may attract the ire of your neighbours, says **Matthew Steen**.

You might have noticed the whine of a garden blower vac in your neighbourhood. Certainly, a few CHOICE staffers were relieved when this test came to an end. We even had one of our neighbours complain about the noise, so beware, using a garden blower vac won't make you very popular.

These vacs are designed to blow leaves into a neat pile and then suck them up. They're definitely quicker than a broom, which took us about 42 minutes to clean up five kilos of leaves over 100 square metres, compared with the best of the garden blower vacs at about 12 minutes and the worst at about 24 for the same job. You can expect a quicker result with practice. All the models on test chop the leaves you suck up with their fan blades, leaving a fine mulch in the attached bag.

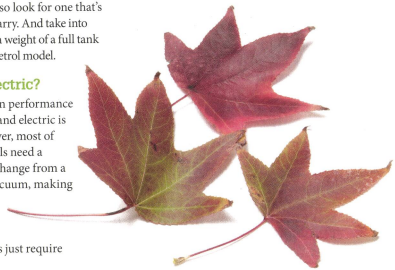
On the downside

Blower vacs are noisy and dirty, sending not only leaves but also dust into the air, which tends to land on the user and the surroundings as well. So it's best not to use one when the washing is out. You'll need to wear a pair of earmuffs to prevent damage to your ears, as some products reach noise levels of more than 100dB, which is dangerous over long periods. For more information about noise levels, go to **www.choice.com.au/hearing**. You'll also want to pick up a pair of goggles so the blower doesn't flick dust or anything else into your eyes. Blowers tend to get heavier as you vacuum, so look for one that's comfortable to carry. And take into account the extra weight of a full tank if you choose a petrol model.

Petrol or electric?

The difference in performance between petrol and electric is minimal; however, most of the petrol models need a screwdriver to change from a blower into a vacuum, making them harder to use. Most of the electric-powered models just require a flick of a switch or lever. If you buy a petrol model, you'll need to puzzle out the ratio of fuels, and with electric you'll need a very long extension lead if you don't have power points outdoors.

And, of course, there's also a significant price difference between one of these vacs and the trusty garden broom. ▸



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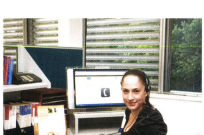

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Hard Word

Waterlogged

Former maths teacher Ian Clapperton points out that the Cybershot used for this promo shot will be... shot, clearly having been submerged more than 3*mm*!

Water Proof to 3mm

A new spin on an old classic?

Or just a stock-standard contradiction in terms.

CUTS ANYTHING WITH EASE... EXCEPT HUMAN FLESH

Ethical considerations prevent us from testing this claim.

Supersaw – cuts anything with ease!

This powerful saw will cut through steel, iron, ceramic, aluminium, glass and brick but amazingly, it won't cut you! The 15cm heavy-duty manganese steel blade will not need sharpening. It also folds away and locks neatly into the handle for storage. Comfortable to hold and easy to use, this tool will make light work of jobs around the home and garden.

Code GR18 **$12.90**

bonus

hot price $249.95

ROBERT WELCH Meridian™ 56-piece cutlery set RRP $1,199.95

BONUS Chef's Knife (valued at $44.95)

NO DEAL

A hot price, but not necessarily a good price. Even with steak knives thrown in, you'll still be $75.05 worse off if you take up this "deal".

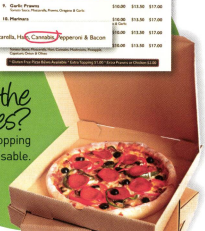
$249.95

was $129.95

Traditional Pizzas
SM MED LGE
1. Margherita $9.00 $12.50 $16.00
2. Napoli $9.00 $12.50 $16.00
3. Australian $9.00 $12.50 $16.00
4. Hawaiian $9.00 $12.50 $16.00
5. Saporita $9.00 $12.50 $16.00
6. Vegetarian $10.00 $13.50 $17.00
7. Caprice $10.00 $13.50 $17.00
8. Mexicana $10.00 $13.50 $17.00
9. Garlic Prawns $10.00 $13.50 $17.00
10. Mariners $10.00 $13.50 $17.00
11. Meat Lovers $10.00 $13.50 $17.00
Tomato Sauce, Mozzarella, Ham, Cannabis, Pepperoni & Bacon
$10.00 $13.50 $17.00

Got the munchies?

This pizza topping may not be advisable.



Thanks to the eagle-eyed spotting of Ashlesha Vaidya, Ian Clapperton, Helen Indorato, Andrew Duval and CHOICE staffer Lynda-Maree Morgan. If you have any examples you think should be shared with other members, send them with your full name to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.